A Dish Best Served Sweet

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A Dish Best Served Sweet

by BuggreAlleThis

Summary

Mo Ran's best friend (and crush) Shi Mei is suddenly transferring from Sisheng University, and Mo Ran is devastated. But when Shi Mei tells him that the reason he's leaving is because his doctoral supervisor came onto him, Mo Ran's heartbreak turns to rage.

He's not even surprised. Former child prodigy Chu Wanning might seem as pure as driven snow, but no one is that monomaniacally ethical, that scrupulously altruistic, without hiding some big secret.

Then, with his parting words, Shi Mei ruefully says that he might be believed if Chu Wanning had been inappropriate with some other student too... and Mo Ran has a *brilliant* idea.

Notes

I will be updating the tags and warnings as I write, but this *is* a 2ha fic, so please expect angst, dubcon, noncon themes and elements, deceit and manipulation throughout, as well as rape and graphic violence in the second half.

Please do comment if you can - it's my first time writing 2ha fic, and I would be so grateful to know what you think!

Chapter 1: Prologue - Part 1

Rufeng University, the richest and most prestigious educational institution in China, had just gained its newest and youngest doctorate.

Its President, Nangong Liu, had asked Chu Wanning to give a speech at the graduation ceremony. He had replied to the e-mail with a simple and blunt *No*.

Rong Yan, his doctoral supervisor, didn't insult him with any *"You didn't have to do this on my account"*-bullshit. Yes, Rong Yan might have been in the process of divorcing her manipulative cheating asshole of a husband, but she also knew her student well.

Chu Wanning hated Nangong Liu. It wasn't purely out of loyalty either – the man was slimy and incredibly, incomprehensibly popular. But Chu Wanning also hated speeches, he hated platitudes and unnecessary words, and he hated standing in front of an audience. His first guqin concert had been when he was just six years old; Huaizui had adopted him out of the orphanage only a few months before, and Chu Wanning had sobbed in fear of the bright spotlights and the hundreds of shaded faces before him, like demons in a fevered nightmare.

Huaizui had knelt down, eye to eye with his young ward, and explained extremely clearly to him what would happen if Chu Wanning didn't go out onto the stage. So he had.

He might be sixteen now, *nearly seventeen*, and he wasn't a scared child anymore, but he had had no desire whatsoever to be Nangong Liu's pet prodigy.

Huaizui wasn't there, obviously, and he had no other relatives or friends to invite. He'd received plenty of applause as he collected his degree, as China's youngest doctorate, but he knew better than to let it go to his head.

The only thing that mattered was Rong Yan, who had braved being in the same room as her husband for him. She was not a physically affectionate woman, even with her own 13-year-old son, but she gave him a rare hug on the other side of the stage, and hurried him out before either of them had to endure Nangong Liu's closing speech.

“The last ordeal, I promise,” Rong Yan said as they emerged into the sunshine, “so I’ll just come out with it. Huaizui wrote to me.”

Chu Wanning picked up the pace.

“It’s not long. He just said that he was proud of you, and thanked me for my help. Do you want to read it?”

Chu Wanning shook his head, lips tight. “He shouldn’t have bothered you.”

“I doubt the prison would allow him to write to you directly. I think there are rules against contacting victims.”

“Then he shouldn’t have written at all.”

“No,” Rong Yan agreed easily. “There. Duty done.” She walked alongside him. “So. A-Si is with my mother – he left a card and a present for you, by the way – but I said that you’d be tired after today. I thought you’d hate a party, and a bar-”

“Is illegal.”

“It’s never enforced, A-Ning! No one cares!”

“*I* care.”

“You don’t care if I give you a drink at home.”

The tips of his ears burnt. “That’s different. I’m not buying it.”

“Oh, so when you buy the drinks, ‘It’s illegal’, but when *I* let you drink my own wine-”

“You are the one making the decision to break the law.”

“So are you, by drinking it.”

“Ah, but I’m not the responsible adult, so.” He shrugged, but was finally smiling at her. Rong Yan was the only person who had ever been able to open him up enough to banter like this. “Besides, we started drinking at the conference in Paris. The pattern was set perfectly legally.”

“I see, I see. So what matters is the first time, and after that, whatever parameters have been set are applicable going forward?”

“Exactly. The essential first step in any new project.”

“The project being increasing your alcohol tolerance.”

“You’re one to talk. I’ll tell you what, on my eighteenth birthday, I’ll buy you a drink.”

Rong Yan laughed. “Just one? I’ll hold you to it. You’d better fly back from wherever you are in the world.”

Chu Wanning’s smiled faltered. “I’ll be here. I’ll walk.”

“You’re taking up the Rufeng post-doc?” She sounded disappointed.

“I *told* you I was.” Chu Wanning cringed with a violent pang of self-loathing; he sounded like a hurt teenager.

“I really think you should consider the Sisheng position, if you want to stay in China. They’re smaller, and they don’t have a fraction of our funding, but they do real work in the community. Xue Zhengyong has talked about nothing else since he met you at the conference in Hong Kong. He e-mails constantly, asking if you’d made up your mind.”

“So?”

“So, he’s a good man. He wants to make a difference.” Rong Yan smiled. “You have a lot in common.”

“He’s not you.” Chu Wanning stared straight ahead, the sleeves of his graduation gown billowing. He felt the corners of his eyes grow hot, and he scrunched up his face. “Unless *you* want me to leave, of course.”

“Hey.” Rong Yan stopped and grabbed his elbow. Chu Wanning stared aggressively down at the ground. “Of course I don’t want you to leave. A-Ning. I don’t know what I’d do without you here. Not just in the lab, not just tutoring A-Si. If I were being selfish, I’d want you here until I retired. You’re my friend. And because you’re my friend, as well as my student, I’m saying that you need to make a name for yourself, and you can’t do that in my shadow.”

“I don’t care about making a name for myself. I’m sick of all that. I’m staying here.” Chu Wanning glanced up to make eye-contact, just for a second, and dropped his gaze again; Rong Yan’s expression was so nakedly affectionate it burnt. “Don’t ask me to go.”

He could hear the smile in Rong Yan’s voice. “I’ll give you a reprieve. The post-doc is fixed term. In one year, I’ll harass you again.”

“Then I’ll refuse again. I’ll put it in my diary now. I’ll tell you what, we can combine them. Next August, I’ll buy you a drink, then tell you to leave me the hell alone about the postdoc.

We can make a night of it."

She laughed at him, then pulled him along. "Yes, speaking of dinner. You eat at restaurants all the time anyway, so tonight, you're coming to mine."

*

Rong Yan was a notorious hardass, with expectations so high for all of her students that even onlookers felt the altitude sickness. But demanding worksheets and chapters from her youngest and newest doctoral student, a mere teenager, who was recovering from *multiple stab wounds*? The woman was clearly a monster.

Chu Wanning would have lain down in traffic for her.

He did not know how he would have made it through his hellish fifteenth year without Rong Yan. She had been his only visitor in the hospital, once he'd been discharged from intensive care. She had brought him a laptop and a mobile phone – "Don't thank me, it's all from your own lab stipend" - along with papers to be marked and data to be analysed.

The nurses had muttered and shot her dirty looks, but Chu Wanning's damaged, broken heart was hers, fully and completely.

She had looked around the ward, narrowed her eyes, and left without a word. An hour later she'd returned, with noise cancelling headphones and a sleeping mask.

She visited several times in the next two weeks to go over his analyses with him and take down his grading summaries. She brought sweets with her, tea or little pastries or fruit. If she couldn't visit in person, she sent her older students to bring him food and news. Most importantly, she sat with him for hours while the police took down his statement, and for every meeting with the victim liaison officer or the trauma consultant.

Leading up his discharge from the hospital, he'd not been able to bear the thought of returning to his flat. He didn't know whether it was still a crime scene, how long the place would be all police tape and luminol and evidence tags, and the thought gave him a panic attack which had had brought the cardiologists running.

And Rong Yan had told him that he would stay with her, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

She and Nangong Liu had already separated, and Nangong Si looked up to Chu Wanning with nothing less than hero worship. If she was busy in the lab, she sent other students to drive him to cardiology follow-ups or physiotherapy appointments. She'd helped him to open his new bank account and to go through his emancipation documents.

Huaizui had been completely co-operative throughout. He had called the ambulance and the police himself, confessed when they arrived, and had communicated all along that he would plead guilty. All of Chu Wanning's extensive hospital bills were paid for by him. The result was that his charge was reduced from attempted murder to intentional infliction of harm, which meant that he could be out of prison in just a few years' time.

Chu Wanning had rejected any of Huaizui's other financial offers, but his studentship had allowed him to rent a room in one of the student accommodation buildings once he was able climb a flight of stairs again. But he was a regular at Rong Yan's house still, either to tutor A-Si, or just to join them both for dinner.

Never had she cooked the Eight Great Bowls for him before, though.

Chu Wanning felt a shot of anxiety when he saw the groaning table. His heartbeat stuttered in a way that would have worried his doctors, and he felt the freezing fear of a hunted animal. He clenched and uncleanched his fists. "This is for me?"

"Well, I was intending to eat around half of it. Not half, I doubt we'll finish, but A-Si will annihilate whatever leftovers there are. That boy *inhales* food."

"No, I mean-" Chu Wanning said helplessly.

"I know what you meant, I'm only teasing. Of course it's for you. It's a special day, Doctor." Rong Yan pulled out a chair and gestured for him to sit. “Look good?”

The effort that she had gone to, just for him… She knew that what Chu Wanning never had, and so what would make the night truly special, was a home-cooked meal. He swallowed painfully. “Mn.”

Rong Yan beamed at him. “I’ve put a Linyi twist on it. Can’t have a Rufeng graduation dinner without fried chicken. And I have this amazing Pear Blossom Baijiu that I think will be right up your alley.”

It was – sweet and tart without being sickly. For several minutes they ate in silence, as was their wont, and Chu Wanning gradually began to feel the tension of the graduation ceremony and Huaizui’s letter leave his shoulders. They picked apart Nangong Liu’s opening address, complete with Rong Yan’s excellent impressions, until half the dishes had been cleared, and the second bottle opened.

“He came around again last Friday. Some tie he said he’d left.”

“Did he bring the papers with him?”

Rong Yan rolled her eyes. “Of course not. ‘Next time, my darling, next time!’”

Chu Wanning sneered in disgust at ‘darling’. “I don't understand why you don’t just refuse to speak to him until he signs them.”

Rong Yan snorted humourlessly. “Of course you don’t.” There was a pause. “Sorry. That was unkind.”

Chu Wanning blinked in surprise. Rong Yan was as blunt as he was, but she was never cruel. He looked down at his fish. “Because I'm- Because I have...?”

“*No*. Because you're sixteen.” The kindness in Rong Yan’s voice gave Chu Wanning the courage to dare glance up at her eyes, which he recognised as smiling at him. “And because you’ve got a principled spirit that the world hasn’t forced you to compromise yet. I’m an asshole, but hopefully not that much of an asshole.”

“You're not an asshole.”

"According to A-Si I am."

A mouthful of rice fell from Chu Wanning's chopsticks. “He called you an *asshole*?” The idea of calling Huaizui an asshole... He wouldn't have seen the light of day for a year. He’d have become a mushroom.

“Oh, yes. He wanted to come tonight, and he definitely did *not* want to finish his homework before going to sleepover at his *laolao*’s. Some game tournament he was in…” She wiped up some ginger sauce with a piece of pork. “But back to my soon-to-be-ex-husband, even after the divorce, we’re still both going to be A-Si’s parents. We'll have to share custody, so we need to keep the divorce as amicable as possible.”

Chu Wanning prodded a piece of snapper. “*He’s* the one who’s not being amicable. You’ve given him every chance, and he uses each one to try to wear you down. It’s coercive.”

She was silent for a moment. “It means a lot, to have someone who sees that.”

“It’s easy to see, if you look at what he’s doing, rather than how he does it.”

Rong Yan laughed and raked a hand through her cropped hair, kept practically short after her chemotherapy a few years before. The laugh had an audibly bitter edge. “Just that? ‘Ah, it’s easy to see, if you aren’t taken in by smiles and flattery…’ It’s a very, very rare and special

person who isn't. I can't blame everyone else. After all, of all the people who've ever been taken in by Nangong Liu's sweet words, only one person's ever been foolish enough to marry him."

Chu Wanning's ears felt hot; his insides squirmed with guilt. "I didn't- I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

Rong Yan waved a hand. "No, no, no, I know." Her smile had softened – it now seemed more sad than resentful. "You mustn't be so hard on yourself all the time, A-Ning. Please. You have such a good soul. I wish I could kill that bastard for making you doubt it."

She sighed. "But I can't! At least, not for a few years – you tell me the second he gets parole, eh? In the meantime, I'll just toast you and your incredible success instead."

Chu Wanning obediently mirrored her and lifted his cup. "Any success of mine is entirely due to your guidance, patience and kindness. *Ganbei*, Rong-*laoshi.*"

"*Ganbei!*"

They toasted several more times, to Chu Wanning's examiners and publishers, to their labmates, to A-Si and his *laolao*, and as the alcohol sent a warm, gentle relaxation through him, their toasts grew sillier and sillier.

He loved her so much. There was no lust or romance in it, and it was quite separate to the gratitude he felt for her. But with Rong Yan, Chu Wanning felt as though he was a human being, not merely a robot created to help the *real* people around him. For the first time in his life, someone had taken notice of his idiosyncracies and fears and preferences, and respected them. He would have died for her.

He should have died for her.

There was the sound of a car pulling up outside the house. Rong Yan frowned, and put down her empty glass. “That’d better not be…”

She went to the window, and swore. “I wonder what the bastard’s excuse is this time…” She glanced back at Chu Wanning, and even he could recognise her expression of discomfort.

Rong Yan had been generous in opening her home to him, and the least he could do was to allow her to save face should her husband decide to be difficult. “I was actually just going to go to the bathroom,” he said, standing up. “Or I could go home…?”

“You’d better not – you want me to clean all this up by myself? Aiyo, so lazy,” she said, but she was smiling. “I’ll tell him where to go, and we’ll carry on celebrating. You remember where it is? Just up the stairs, to the right.”

As Chu Wanning passed her, Rong Yan touched his elbow. “Thank you.”

They were the last words she ever said to him.

Chapter 2: Prologue - Part 2

The voices from downstairs were rising. Chu Wanning flushed the toilet a second time, hoping that the sound might alert Nangong Liu that there was someone else in the house, but the shouting didn't stop. Perhaps they couldn't even hear it over the noise…

He washed his hands and dried them. He knew that Rong Yan would hate a witness to an argument with her husband; she told Chu Wanning a great deal, but he knew from past experience with Huaizui that it was a very different thing entirely for someone else to see your humiliation.

They were coming up the stairs now – Nangong Liu's heavier tread first, followed by the sound of Rong Yan's low heels.

"You don't *live here anymore*, you can't just go up to my bedroom and demand to look for- hey, I'm talking to you!"

The hairs on the back of Chu Wanning's neck stood up.

He never knew exactly what told him something was about to go so horribly wrong. Perhaps it was because Nangong Liu was silent, instead of wheedling and explaining.

And then, outside-

"*Hey-!"*

He was too slow.

He would hate himself for the rest of his life, for being too slow. He would hate himself even more for trying to be tactful, to *do the done thing*. Most of all, he would hate himself for

prioritising politeness over protection.

He wrenched open the door as the sound of the first thud reached his ears. He nearly pulled the handle right out of the wood.

He saw it like it was a film in slow motion: Rong Yan falling; the banister and her arm cracking simultaneously; the sick sound of flesh hitting wood. Her head went into the wall at the bottom of the stairs, the momentum of gravity throwing her body forward after it.

Chu Wanning saw Rong Yan's neck snap.

He didn't waste any energy in screaming. He was already running down, hands out to help her, but he was too late – any idiot could have seen that he was too late.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialled 120. He looked up the stairs at Nangong Liu, who stared back at him in astonishment, mouth agape. Not at his wife's open eyes, or the growing pool of blood. At Chu Wanning.

"Ambulance!" he shouted down the phone, eyes never leaving Nangong Liu. Would he try to kill Chu Wanning too? Eliminate the witness? But Nangong Liu didn't move.

He heard the sound of the emergency operator's voice as though it was coming from a million miles away. Chu Wanning could feel his throat closing up, the words becoming larger and harder, and he knew he had seconds before he wouldn't be able to speak at all. He gave Rong Yan's address, knowing that was the most important thing, but he had to physically squeeze every syllable out. It felt like they were sitting in his stomach, half digested, and the only way to enunciate them was to swallow a fish-hook and drag each one up and out.

"Supervisor. Fell. Stairs. Not breathing. *Please*."

He shouldn't have wasted his breath on the final word. Surely there was more important information that he could have shared, before he become completely non-verbal, but it fell

from his sixteen-year-old lips easily. The only word that was easy.

Nangong Liu took a step down towards him, and Chu Wanning scrambled back. He held the phone out between them like it was a shield, knowing that his call was being recorded.

Nangong Liu looked at it, and then back at Chu Wanning's face. He nodded.

Nothing could have been more terrifying.

They could already hear the sirens. Rong Yan's house was right next to Jiaoshan College's main site, one of the slate-roofed two-storey houses with small front and back gardens, specifically built to house Faculty members during the university's last big expansion. Rong Yan had claimed it as one of the emoluments she was entitled to as a Professor in the Physics Faculty when she moved out of the President's Lodgings.

Chu Wanning didn't turn his back for one second. He dragged himself up between the wall and a small side-cabinet; the emergency operator's voice was still coming from the phone, tinny and shrill.

He reached behind his back for the door handle. If Nangong Liu did attack him… Chu Wanning was smaller, younger. He had the phone. But Nangong Liu had, apparently, the killing intent, the sheer ruthlessness-

She was *dead*. How could she be dead? They'd been eating dinner. He'd graduated that afternoon, and now Rong Yan was *dead*? It made no sense.

Oh, god. Oh, *A-Si*.

His groping hand found the handle of the front door, and he wrenched it open. Nangong Liu still stood on the top step of the stairs, Rong Yan's twisted body between them, but Chu Wanning backed out anyway. Something else flashed in front of his stretched eyes: Huaizui, grabbing the kitchen knife out of the block on the counter. *"You treacherous ingrate."*

He fell backwards off the front step, and the concrete sent a jolt of pain right up his spine, flashed against the back of his head.

The ambulance was pulling in.

The paramedics ran past him, but it would be obvious to them that she was dead. A woman came out to where he sat on the path that led to the front door, and Chu Wanning should have told her not to turn her back on Nangong Liu, but he had no words anymore.

Her voice sounded distorted, as though they were both underwater. Chu Wanning could hear his pulse in his ears, deafeningly loud and horribly irregular; he fluttered his hand over his chest, trying to communicate what was happening to the paramedic.

"You treacherous ingrate."

In between his pulse and Huaizui's poisonous words, Chu Wanning caught snatches of speech: "cervical spine stabilisation", "medical control", "white fluid". A police car arrived.

His whole body was shaking uncontrollably. He looked up, and saw two officers in uniform speaking to Nangong Liu. He needed to tell them, to shout that Nangong Liu had killed his wife, but his jaw was locked, as tight and immovable as if it had been cast in steel.

A second police car arrived. These policemen wore suits.

The paramedics were wheeling some kind of machine into the house. Another female paramedic tried to take his pulse, and Chu Wanning pulled his arm out of her grasp. Her brief touch burnt his skin, and he felt maggots and bacteria and electricity all squirming beneath. He made some kind of grunting noise, and hated himself with an acidic passion. He sounded like an animal.

One of the suited policemen had his hand on Nangong Liu's shoulder. Nangong Liu pinched the bridge of his nose.

This was the thing that made Chu Wanning stagger to his feet. He rose like a creature in a horror film, something stitched together from various parts, or something made of wood or stone that could only creak upright.

The other suited policeman moved to intercept him. "Chu Wanning?"

He nodded.

"It's all right, son," the detective said. "My name's Detective Chen; my colleague there is Detective Li. Can you come over here? Let's get you sitting down."

Chu Wanning let the policeman manhandle him onto the backseat of the police car. "He-" he tried, forcing the word through his teeth. "Pushed!"

Detective Chen looked down at him. For some reason, his gaze moved down to Chu Wanning's legs. And then, without warning, he slammed the door shut.

Chu Wanning frowned. He tried the door handle, but the door didn't open. He took in the cage-grate separating the back seats from the front, and realisation slowly, horrifyingly dawned.

He tried the other door, desperately, and then went back to the first. The detectives were speaking to Nangong Liu, looking over at him, and Chu Wanning wrenched on the plastic handle with a growing madness.

He wanted to rage at them, to try to smash the window, to pull the grate down. If they were going to cage him like a beast, he'd show them one. He wanted to hiss and snarl and shriek; he wanted to bang his head against the glass until it or his skull cracked, and he didn't care particularly as to which one went first.

With superhuman effort, he pushed the desire and the fury down, until it boiled under his skin, until it felt like ten thousand volts trapped in his bone marrow. His back teeth and his fingers ached from the tension in his muscles.

It was another important lesson Huaizui had taught him. In the orphanage, the consequence of a tantrum was a beating, but that would have been far too messy for Huaizui's taste. He had just locked him in the utility cupboard until Chu Wanning's first meltdown had finished, and then told him that if he ever did such a thing again, he would be thrown out right back where he had come from.

He watched the ambulance leave. They had let Nangong Liu into the back with Rong Yan's body. As though he was still her husband.

The fury leeched out of his body, bit by bit, until he felt freezing cold despite the warm summer temperature. He couldn't even keep his head upright. Exhausted, he leant it against the cool glass of the window, and brought his legs up. He hugged them tightly, subconsciously hoping that the pressure might help. He could *not* cry. He needed to be able to speak.

The opening of the front doors wrenched him out of the dark, cold void he was falling into; he looked through the grill warily, and brought his legs down.

Detective Li turned around in his seat to face Chu Wanning. "So."

"This is false imprisonment," Chu Wanning said, with icy dignity. "You've not arrested me."

"Oh, so you *can* talk. I wondered if you could only make animal noises. We could arrest you, if you'd prefer. Drunk and disorderly."

"I'm not drunk, and I wasn't disorderly."

“But you have been drinking?” Chu Wanning didn’t reply. “And you’re only sixteen. It’s illegal.”

A strange, hideous laughter bubbled in his chest. *See, Rong Yan?* “Then arrest me. I have plenty to say.”

“Mm. So did President Nangong.” Detective Chen’s gaze bore into him. “Why don’t you let us know what happened?”

“Nangong Liu murdered his wife. He lured her upstairs, and then pushed her.”

“Did you see him do this?”

“I heard it.”

“I see. And where were you?”

“I was in the bathroom, at the top of the stairs, to the right.”

Neither of the policemen were taking notes. “Why on earth would President Nangong want to kill his wife? He was distraught,” Detective Li mused.

“They were separated. They have been for two years. He’s been prevaricating, trying to delay their divorce.”

“If he was already divorcing her, why would he need to kill her? He was already rid of her.”

Chu Wanning scoffed. “Come on! Are you being deliberately obtuse?”

The policemen looked at each other.

“She was divorcing *him*. He was refusing to sign the papers! Now, instead of a cheat whose wife left him, he’s a tragic widower. He doesn’t need to pay her a penny. He’ll have full custody of their son!”

“It seems like you've given this a lot of thought.”

“It’s blindingly obvious! Are you stupid, or corrupt? Or both?”

“If we *are* corrupt, we’re not the ones being stupid,” Detective Li said delicately through the mesh.

Chu Wanning’s eyes widened. His hand went unconsciously to the door handle, and Detective Chen smiled at him.

“It doesn’t open from the inside, boy. I thought you were supposed to be clever?”

“Some kind of child genius,” Detective Li added.

Chen shrugged. “Well. A child in *some* ways.”

Chu Wanning felt the ice of terror drop down his spine. “What do you mean?”

“Well, just… Ms. Rong had prepared quite a spread. A bottle of baijiu between the two of you.”

“You will address her as Professor Rong. She earnt her title!” Chu Wanning’s eyes flashed. “She’s my *doctoral supervisor.* Today was my graduation!”

“Her own son’s only a couple of years younger than you. But she made sure he was out of the house.”

Chu Wanning’s jaw dropped. Disgust flooded him. “Are you suggesting-? *Shameless!*”

Li laughed. “Look, we’re just giving the facts as we see them.”

“A filthy mind will always see filth,” Chu Wanning snarled. Li’s amused smile instantly vanished.

Chen looked sympathetic. “You’re sixteen. You’re over the age of consent. We’re not accusing Ms. Rong of a *crime*.”

“She was my supervisor! She *never*-“

“Exactly. Your supervisor. It’s not illegal, but it’s certainly inappropriate, isn’t it? You might not have felt you could say no to her. You might not have wanted to – she was a good-looking woman. No mother of your own, you know, people would understand why you’d done it.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “You’re sick!”

Chen continued as though Chu Wanning hadn’t spoken. “But *her*, sleeping with a boy young enough to be her son…”

Li came in. “A very damaged boy. A jury would understand that. One of those terrible orphanages, then violence in the home… Mentally abnormal.”

No. No, no, no, *no*-

He was going to vomit. His tongue was swollen, his mouth was full of bitter saliva, the acid was scorching his throat.

“After all,” Chen interjected, “you *do* give a guilty impression. Your voice is flat. You can barely even make eye contact with us.”

Chu Wanning stared deep into the man’s eyes. If he *was* going to be sick, he hoped it would be all over Chen's smug, disgusting face.

“Maybe she’d decided she was going to stay with her husband. Told you over a dinner, when you might be thinking of moving on anyway. But you’d been drinking….”

“That’s not what happened!” Chu Wanning shouted. “I’m the one who called the ambulance!”

“Yes, indeed. Just what a clever murderer would do, after all. *‘I’m the one who called the ambulance*.’ Very quick-thinking. Almost... prescient. President Nangong, on the other hand, well, he was in shock – he came out of the bathroom just as Ms Rong was falling-“

“*I was the one in the bathroom!*”

“That’s not what *President* Nangong says,” said Chen, and Chu Wanning finally heard and understood the stress. Chen paused for a moment, savouring Chu Wanning’s devastated comprehension, and then continued. “But he says that she fell. She’d been drinking, her heel caught on the runner…”

“Such a tragedy. It’s late, and you’re upset,” Li said. “So, why don’t we just make this very simple, eh? Just answer, yes or no, and if you’re truthful, you have nothing to worry about. Did you *see* President Nangong push his wife down the stairs?”

Chu Wanning clenched his fists in the fabric of his trousers. His throat was closing up again, and he felt faint. “No.”

“Sorry, your voice is very quiet. Would you say that again?”

“No.”

“There you go. See? He is a clever boy after all.”

“I can’t believe we met a celebrity tonight. Did you know he’s China’s youngest doctorate? President Nangong said.”

“Let me out,” Chu Wanning whispered. He really was going to vomit.

“No, no, let us give you a lift,” Chen said, and the two policemen put on their seatbelts. “No need to tell us the address if you feel sick. We radioed over for it, so we already know exactly where you live.”

It wasn’t just his throat. His chest was growing tighter and tighter. “I can’t breathe. Please. Please, let me out.”

You treacherous ingrate.

“Ah, it’s just around the corner.”

“Please!” Intellectually he knew it was hopeless, but he scrabbled at the door handle anyway. A uniformed officer stood in the doorway of Rong Yan's house, in front of the police tape. “I really, I really can’t breathe-“

Li started the engine. “Poor boy. We’ll walk you right to your door. Make sure you’re safe inside. Don’t you worry.”

Chapter 3: Twelve Years Later

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for reading!! I feel so nervous writing in a new fandom, especially one I'm so fresh to, so your comments mean the absolute world to me. We're now in the main story of the fic, picking up when Chu Wanning is 29 and Mo Ran is 24!

"Chu-*laoshi*'s on the warpath," Xue Meng said without ceremony, throwing the door open with a loud bang. "Camera in our safety shower."

The XS laboratory had its own bathroom, given their relatively remote position on the mountain campus. Chu Wanning's lab was always known as the XS lab. *He* thought that this stood for "Xiu Sheji", "Cultivating Design". To everyone else, the XS stood for Xia Sini, 'Scare you to death', on account of its PI's notorious temper.

Mo Ran looked up from his fretting model. "What, again?"

Xue Meng nodded and fell into the chair at his own workstation. "He's on the phone to Dad now. What if someone had taken a video of me?"

Mo Ran snorted. "Poor them."

"Fuck off! They could have taken a video of you too, you know!"

He doubted it. Mo Ran was only the lowly master's student, and he never stayed late enough to bother using the lab's shower instead of the one at the gym. He showered where his priorities lay.

"Wouldn't care if they had. They only need to ask, I'll give them a show."

“You’re so gross.”

“Don’t be jealous, Mengmeng. Why don’t you come to the gym with me, and I’ll help you with the big boy weights?”

“Why don’t you stay late with me, and I’ll help *you* with the big boy equations?”

Mo Ran laughed easily. “All right, I’ll give you that one.”

A dark thought crossed his mind. What if *Shi Mei* had been filmed? It was almost certainly Chu Wanning who was the target – it had been last time, when that poor idiot girl had been expelled after she’d been discovered – and he was the only one who regularly stayed late and used the safety shower outside of spills. But had Shi Mei stayed late more recently? He was the one who was closest to finishing, nearly twenty-seven to Xue Meng's twenty-three and Mo Ran’s twenty-four.

No, Mo Ran reassured himself. Shi Mei preferred to work in the library rather than at their workstations. All three of them did, just like they preferred to eat in the cafeteria. Then they could relax, chat and laugh (and fight) without Chu Wanning sitting there like a conversational black hole. Mo Ran doubted he’d have told them off for their childish behaviour if they were at lunch, but if the conversation ever got the least bit risqué or gossipy they all knew he’d begin radiating disapproval.

“*You’ll* give-”

“Enough!”

Chu Wanning cut through the lab like lightning through a storm. As always, he was wearing his white labcoat over a white turtleneck jumper, his hair pulled up into a sharp ponytail on top of his head. “Do you not have enough work to be getting on with?”

Xue Meng started typing instantly, loud and fast. Probably nonsense, to look busy for Chu Wanning, Mo Ran thought with amusement he didn't bother to disguise.

"Especially you, Mo Ran," Chu Wanning said. "Where's your abstract?"

Fuck. Fuck! Fuck, the Course 2 abstract. The one he'd already had two extensions for. Stall for time. He grinned charmingly. "Abstract?"

Chu Wanning's face twisted, and Mo Ran *saw* his hand twitch with the urge to throw something at him. "Mo Weiyu, I am *not* in the mood."

When was he ever? Chu Wanning was the most humourless bastard that had ever been carved from wood or ice – Mo Ran refused to believe an actual human woman could have birthed him.

He'd fully intended to work on it the night before, but then he'd run into Rong Jiu as he was walking from the gym to his flat, and they'd decided to get a drink, and one thing had led to another – as it usually did with Rong Jiu. "I left it at home…"

"Then print off another copy. You did e-mail it to yourself, didn't you? How many times do I have to tell you to back-up-"

"I hand-wrote it."

Chu Wanning's eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted, but he had no proof that Mo Ran was lying. He exhaled through his nose. "I don't have time for this today. Shi Mingjing has a supervision. Fetch it from home. You'd better be back by the time we've finished."

Mo Ran gratefully fled.

*

There were many reasons why a graduate student might apply to be supervised by Chu Wanning.

After leaving Oxford with an MMathPhys, followed by Rufeng University with a PhD in Quantum Mechanics, he had moved to Beijing and taken up a position at the age of seventeen with the China National Space Administration. While there, he earnt a second doctorate in Aerospace Engineering from Tsinghua while working on the BeiDou-2 satellite navigation system. By the age of twenty, he was being referred to by everyone in CNSA as Yuheng - the brightest star in the Beidou asterism.

(Other researchers, particularly the female ones, also gave him a rather more tongue-in-cheek nickname of the Beidou Immortal, on account of his elegant bearing, preference for formal language, and the hair that fell from a high ponytail to his waist that made him look like a cultivator in a xianxia drama.)

The trouble began when he went to work on the Tianwen-1 mission. He made several improvements to the Mars rover's golden radiation shielding, and it seemed that nothing could tarnish his career either. Alongside his Tianwen work, he had created what he called the Night Guardian - an air purifier that was automatically activated by its own sensors for carbon monoxide and dioxide. He published the specifications for free and made them available online to all; he also made further modifications to the schematics so that they could be more easily built or repaired at home, particularly in rural areas where specialised components would be more difficult to source. In recognition of the number of lives the Guardians had saved in their province, he was awarded his third doctorate, an honourary PhD from Sichuan University in Mechanical Engineering.

Then he invented his Shangqing Radiation Barrier.

Chu Wanning had, in his patent application, demanded that his design only be used in nuclear power systems serving civilian populations or in aerospace exploration – but for no military purpose. His inventions were only for the betterment of humanity and the protection of lives.

The patent was refused, and the government confiscated the schematics. There it was discovered that while the barrier design worked perfectly in normal air pressure or in the vacuum of space, high pressure environments rendered the components extremely brittle. The

Shangqing was totally useless in nuclear submarines. The military concluded that Chu Wanning had sabotaged his own design to prevent them from using it, and sued him.

The Supreme People's Court eventually, reluctantly, found in his favour, but the damage had been done. The result for Chu Wanning was a nonpareil reputation among the scientific community, several months held under RSDL, blacklisting from the CNSA and all national bodies, a truly impressive government file as a potential dissident, and daily death threats from military supporters. No university in the country was willing to hire such an infamous intellectual, who would probably be arrested within a year.

No university, but one.

Any of these reasons was enough to bring students flocking to Chu Wanning's classes, but unfortunately, Mo Ran could not honestly claim any of them.

He'd first decided to study engineering at Sisheng because Chu Wanning, his then newly-discovered cousin's professor, was hot. Disgustingly, *ludicrously* hot.

He was tall – several inches shorter than Mo Ran, sure, but who wasn't? – and *lithe*, built like a whip (with the tongue to match). The first time he'd conceded to hot summer temperatures and taught in shirt-sleeves, Mo Ran hadn't taken in a single word the entire lecture; all he could think about was how tiny the man's waist was, mentally comparing it to the span of his own hand.

He had a long neck, perfect pale skin, a narrow jaw and high cheekbones. His phoenix eyes were large and black, eyelashes thick and long, eyebrows as straight as swords. The only thing inconsistent with his perfectly respectable image was the length of his hair; it was *stupid*-long, silken and shiny and as ink-black as Mo Ran's name.

That hair drove him crazy. It was so incongruous. A mystery. He longed to let it down from Chu Wanning's severe high ponytail; he wanted to stroke it between his fingers; he wanted to wrap it around his fist and pull it until Chu Wanning cried. When Mo Ran had run into Chu Wanning with his hair wet, fresh from the safety shower after a lubricant spill, he'd not been able to hold himself back until he'd got home; he'd had to masturbate in the toilets, like a fucking teenager.

Mo Ran had once seen a modelling agent come up to Chu Wanning in the street, nearly weeping at his luck. Within sixty seconds of introducing himself, he was weeping for an entirely different reason, trapped in the onslaught of a fully loaded Chu Wanning Barrage™ on mockery and street harassment.

When he'd stopped laughing, Mo Ran had said, "He was only paying you a compliment, Chu-*laoshi*. He thinks you're good-looking!"

Chu Wanning had turned on Mo Ran, eyes flashing with fury, looking up at him like a particularly angry cat whose tail had just been stepped on. "You can shut the hell up too!"

The proud bastard probably thought that his looks threatened his standing as a serious academic or something. *"I should be respected for my seminal discoveries and field-changing innovations, not my god-given bone structure or my perfect ass."*

Nah, Chu Wanning would never mention his own ass. He probably tried to forget he had one as much as possible. Mo Ran wished he could do the same.

Unfortunately, he'd discovered too late that Chu Wanning's hotness on the outside was directly proportional to his iciness on the inside. The man was a stone-cold bastard. Merciless in his marking, venomous in his verdicts. He refused to mark to a curve, but anything less than 95% resulted in a failing grade and compulsory resits until his high standards were met.

"You are not writing essays on literature," he would say when his high expectations were not met. "You are not playing a piece of music. You want to be an engineer. *To these from birth is Belief forbidden; from these till death is Relief afar*. If you make a mistake, a single mistake, people die. Medics, if they make a mistake, kill one person. You could kill hundreds. Thousands of people will trust you, every day. And if you are flippant or lazy in becoming worthy of that trust, you can stop wasting our time and get out right now. If you don't know how to do something, tell me. But do *not* hand in shoddy, incorrect work. The people deserve better."

The people, the people, the people. It was enough to make you cry. Or vomit.

No, *people* were all Chu Wanning cared about. His own students weren't people, of course – fuck them, fuck their mental health and fuck their degrees. Chu Wanning's robotic brain could only cope with the semantic component indicated by the word 'people'; he didn't understand the real thing, and so the real thing meant nothing to him. It was an ethical obsession, not real compassion.

Robo-autist piece-of-shit, Mo Ran thought as he rode his bike through Wuchang. How could he have forgotten the fucking abstract?! At least if it was handwritten, Chu Wanning wouldn't be able to immediately run the keywords. He just had to find something plausible…

He'd let his dick make a lot of questionable decisions for him in the past, and taking that engineering class was probably the worst. Yet something about it had been addictive. The challenge. He'd put more effort into that class than all his others combined, and he still had to push himself. Due to his unstable childhood, he was older than everyone else in the class – he was only able to be studying for a degree at all due to his uncle's generosity with private tuition and extra exams. He'd refused to be bottom of the class in addition to the old street-thug at the back.

Slowly, so slowly, he'd climbed the class rankings. Chu Wanning made him attend hours upon hours of one-on-one catch-up, drilling him like some army sergeant. Chu Wanning's sneer of contempt whenever he turned in less-than-stellar work kept him up at night. A nod of approval from him meant more than effusive praise from anyone else.

And eventually he'd applied for the Master's. He couldn't let Chu Wanning *win*. The feeling of proving him wrong was like a drug he couldn't stop chasing.

Which is why he was biking through the freezing December air with a cribbed abstract. It wasn't like he was going to actually *use* it. He'd knuckle down, he'd write a new one, a proper one – this would just give him room to breathe.

He arrived back at the lab in the nick of time. The safety shower, camera or no camera, was looking like a decent option.

The lab was empty, and the door to Chu Wanning's office was ajar. Empty too. Where was everyone?

He sat down at his workstation. Chu Wanning normally did supervisions in his office, but no one was there now. And where was Xue Meng?

Chu Wanning came in.

He did not walk with the purposeful, angry stride of an hour before. He seemed unbalanced, somehow; he knocked his hip into the corner of Shi Mei's workstation and hissed. Wisps of his hair were coming down from his ponytail, which was slightly off-centre, and his eyes had a dazed, faraway look.

Mo Ran looked down at his hands. They were shaking.

"Mo Ran! What are you- oh, the abstract. Perhaps we could postpone… No. No," he said, and stood up straight again. "Right. Come through."

Mo Ran frowned. "You all right?"

"Fine! I'm absolutely fine. Though I'd be better if you'd remembered to bring it in the first place," Chu Wanning snapped.

Right, fine. That's what he got for being concerned. Stupid prick.

Chu Wanning sat behind his desk, and pulled his ponytail tight with enough force to make Mo Ran wince. Any empathy disappeared when Chu Wanning snapped his fingers for the abstract, making Mo Ran feel like a dog doing a trick. He handed it over.

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes, as he always did when reading Mo Ran's handwriting. He stopped, and then started from the top again.

He was already milk-white, but as he read his lips became thinner and paler.

He put down the piece of paper, and Mo Ran recognised too late the calm before the Chu Wanning Storm. “This isn’t yours.”

“It is.”

“It’s not, Mo Weiyu!” Chu Wanning looked up at him, face twisted. “This was a talk given- five years ago? Six? Some first year doctorate from Xi’an Jiaotong, she presented it at a conference in Nanjing.”

Mo Ran’s jaw dropped. “How do you-“

“Because I was there!”

“But-“ Mo Ran didn’t even bother to lie. “Six years ago! How can you possibly remember some first year PhD from a conference six years ago?!”

“I pay attention! You might consider trying it!” Chu Wanning pinched the bridge of his nose. “Of all days, you picked today? I thought *you* at least I could- You lied to my *face,* Mo Ran! Why would you- Over something as small as this?”

“Because you blow up over anything! Even something ‘as small as this’!” Mo Ran could cope with contempt (he couldn’t), but Chu Wanning had no right to sound disappointed, not after being such a dickhead to them all day in and day out. “You know, if you were even in the least bit forgiving, maybe I could have just told you? Maybe I wouldn't have had to lie?”

“Of course. I forgot that I am the villain of the piece. How stupid of me, not to realise that this was my fault.” Chu Wanning's eyes were flashing dangerously. “Please, do enlighten me - what personal circumstances made it impossible for you to complete your work in time?”

Mo Ran stared him down. “I was volunteering.”

“Volunteering. Where?”

“Soup kitchen.”

“I didn’t realise a soup kitchen operated out of the Cascade Bar.”

Fuck. “How did you-“

“You were outside last night at 11:35, because that’s when I was walking home. You were not exactly discreet.” Chu Wanning cocked his head. “Or are you a bird, Mo Ran? Were you perhaps *feeding* your lovely friend? Volunteering at a soup kitchen...”

It *was* stupid. One stupid lie after another. It was what Mo Ran always did, dug himself deeper and deeper into a hole, over the most idiotic of things. He opened his mouth to apologise, when Chu Wanning continued, in a small, bitter voice. “Why do I bother with you? Why have I wasted so much time on you? You are beyond remedy. Get the hell out of my sight.”

Anger and humiliation froze in his gut; hatred settled heavy and icy in the pit of his stomach.

Never breaking eye contact, Mo Ran swept Chu Wanning’s mug off the desk; Chu Wanning jumped in his chair, giving Mo Ran a thrill of dark satisfaction. Then he turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

Chapter 4: The Hangover

The bath that Chu Wanning had run for himself had been scalding hot, so hot that he had nearly passed out when he finally rose from it. He had soaped and scrubbed every inch of his body until his skin was red and raw; he had broken the skin on his lower lip where Shi Mingjing had crushed it. Anything to erase that ghostly sensation.

He felt a strange, pathetic grief, under the confusion and distress. His first kiss. The first time someone had touched him, and it had been his own student, in an assault he had somehow invited.

"I'm sorry, Chu-laoshi. I need..."

He didn't *understand*. Why would Shi Mingjing do such a thing? Why would he *need* to?

There was no way in hell that it could be out of physical attraction; Chu Wanning dismissed that idea instantly, staring at his own skull-like reflection. A pale, bony face, with exhaustion-ringed eyes, thin lips, and an omnipresent frown. A face like that could only inspire lust in someone truly deranged, and Shi Mingjing might not be a brilliant student, but he was sensible and intelligent, and so genuinely handsome he bordered on beautiful.

At least, Chu Wanning had always thought so, with a dispassionate objectivity. But turning around from the whiteboard to find the source of a sudden shadow, to see Shi Mingjing's face so close, looming over him... Those doe eyes and that gentle expression had frightened him.

Did Shi Mingjing think that a decent reference was dependent on such a thing? He was coming to the end of his doctorate, after all; he was putting in applications for post-docs.

How could Chu Wanning have given him that impression? What had he *said*? Surely Shi Mingjing knew that he would always give one of his students a glowing recommendation?

Well... no. He almost certainly didn't. After all, look at how critical Chu Wanning was, at how impossible he found it to give open and sincere praise.

So that was it? He had been such a terrible supervisor, so cold and cruel, that Shi Mingjing thought that the only way he could guarantee a decent reference was to... *proposition* him?

He couldn't even think it. The fear and anger he had felt were congealing into shame and guilt.

Should he apologise to Shi Mingjing? Bring up the postdoc again?

He didn't think he could do it. He couldn't be in the same room as him again, without feeling that surprisingly strong grip on his wrist. Trapped between Shi Mingjing's lips and the whiteboard, and then the hand cupping his groin, pressing a place that Chu Wanning himself barely touched-

He felt the roil of bile in his stomach again, but he had already emptied it.

His reaction to the sudden kiss, the sudden *sickwrong* press through his trousers that had sent a nauseating jolt up his spine, had been to freeze. What if Shi Mingjing had taken that as acquiescence? Invitation? He'd only been snapped out of his shock by the sight of Xue Meng just beyond the doorframe, and only then had he shoved Shi Mingjing away. Did Shi Mingjing think that it was only the threat of discovery that made his advances unwelcome?

Would he do it again?

Chu Wanning could feel his breath hitching, his heart pattering. He lay on his bed, curling up tightly, and pulled the duvet over himself, careless of wetting the sheets and the cover. He squeezed his eyes closed.

An even worse idea occurred to him. Perhaps Shi Mingjing had seen the way he looked at Mo Ran, and… extrapolated.

Was that it? That Shi Mingjing had realised what a disgusting, predatory lech Chu Wanning really was, the kind of filthy old man who was infatuated with his own student, and thought that he would welcome such a thing from *any* student?

He pulled the duvet tighter around himself, shivering.

And, oh, *Mo Ran*. How could he have been so cruel to Mo Ran? Mo Ran lied about stupid things sometimes, small things, worried about disappointing people – Chu Wanning *knew* this, knew at least the broad strokes of Mo Ran's disrupted and unstable childhood, and he always tried to keep this in mind whenever Mo Ran was flippant or facetious. He always forgave Mo Ran more than any other student, and if Shi Mingjing had noticed that…

How had he made such a mess of everything? Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut against the prickling heat. He'd always thought that at least he couldn't be as terrible a teacher as Huaizui, but he was certainly giving him a run for his money now.

No one would ever believe he'd not wanted it. No one would believe the most severe and unpopular professor in Sisheng over a student as kind and sweet and lovely as Shi Mingjing. What the *hell* was he going to do?

The propranolol he'd taken was beginning to work, and his heartbeat was beginning to slow. The madness of panic gradually receded.

As much as it filled him with humiliated shame to admit it, Xue Meng's witness could be the thing to save him. The… *event* would have been captured on the lab's cameras; they wouldn't have sound, but between those two things Chu Wanning's side of the story would be corroborated. He wasn't an isolated child anymore.

Shi Mingjing knew that Xue Meng had seen what had happened, and he knew that the lab had a security feed. Chu Wanning would give him a way to leave with dignity, and without any further scandal. He could protect them both from that. He hoped that Shu Mingjing would understand it in the spirit with which Chu Wanning planned to offer it: an apology, for whatever he had done to lead them into such a dreadful situation.

*

It had taken all of Mo Ran's willpower to wake up with his alarm. He'd drunk too much the night before, falling into a tossing stew of spirits, replaying Chu Wanning's words in his mind.

A waste of time. Beyond remedy.

He'd tried to comfort himself with the thought of how Chu Wanning had jumped in his chair when Mo Ran had thrown his mug. Eyes wide with fear and surprise.

He might not be able to engender praise and affection, but at least he could wring that much from the uptight freak.

It didn't work.

He'd woken instead with a churning stomach and a throbbing head. The temptation to put two middle fingers up to Chu Wanning, Sisheng University, and his whole stupid degree had been nearly overwhelming. But that would have been letting the bastard break him, so he arrived at the usual time, coffee in hand. Let Chu Wanning be the one to feel awkward.

The door to Chu Wanning's office was closed, and Xue Meng was nowhere to be seen. Only Shi Mei was at his workstation.

Mo Ran's heart lifted, and he made a beeline for Shi Mei, perching on the edge of his desk. "Hey – you won't *believe* what Chu-fuckhead said to me yester... You all right?"

Shi Mei hadn't greeted him with his usual sweet smile. Instead, he shook his head, and blinked as though he was forcing back tears.

Then he reached out and took Mo Ran’s hand.

Mo Ran was instantly solicitous. He turned Shi Mei’s hand over, clasping it in his own. “Hey, hey, it’s all right! Shi Mei. What's happened?”

Shi Mei glanced at Chu Wanning’s closed door. “He's going to make me transfer. I know it.”

"What? Why would- you've only got six months! You’re about to start writing up! Why the hell would he- Did he say something about your work?”

Shi Mei shook his head again, lips pursed tight.

“It makes no sense for him to do that. Shi Mei, come on. How would it look, if he abandoned his student with just a few months to go? If you’re not ready to write, surely there’s some bursary to give you enough time to get it sorted?”

“It’s not that. It’s not the project. A-Ran, it’s bad,” Shi Mei whispered.

“It can’t be that bad,” Mo Ran said, heart breaking at the expression on Shi Mei’s face. “Nothing’s so bad we can’t work something out. There’s not much a little murder and arson can’t sort out, eh?” Shi Mei didn’t laugh. “If he said something about the project, you know that’s what he’s like – yesterday he said I was completely beyond remedy over some stupid abstract.”

Mo Ran was not as confident as he sounded. Shi Mei had improved greatly under Chu Wanning’s tutelage, but his marks upon entry to the doctoral programme had been the lowest in the department. If Chu Wanning hadn't agreed to supervise his project, he would have been rejected from the course. If Shi Mei’s project was unsalvageable, would Chu Wanning really cut his losses rather than have a supervisory failure on his record? Surely even he couldn't be so heartless?

“No one will believe me,” Shi Mei whispered.

“Believe what? I’ll believe you,” Mo Ran said. Shi Mei’s distraught expression gave him the courage to lift his hand and cup Shi Mei’s cheek. “I’ll always believe you. Please, talk to me. I’ll fix it.”

“A-Ran...”

A thud sounded behind them. Chu Wanning had just dropped a coffee cup into the bin; the sharp, familiar scent rose from it.

Mo Ran stood up, protectively shielding Shi Mei.

Chu Wanning’s lip curled. “Where is Xue Meng?”

Shi Mei gently pushed Mo Ran to the side. “He’s in the robotics lab. He said he wanted to make some changes before the tournament…”

Chu Wanning nodded. “Well, Mo Ran will do. Stay there, and don’t say anything,” he said to Mo Ran with a glare, before his cold gaze snapped back to Shi Mei. “After our talk yesterday, I have come to the conclusion that I am no longer the best person to supervise your doctorate.”

“What the *fuck*?”

“I told you to be quiet!” Chu Wanning said, rounding on Mo Ran. “You are here as a witness, not a participant in this conversation!”

“It’s all right, A-Ran,” Shi Mei said bravely. He stood up from his desk. “I understand, Chu-*laoshi*.”

Chu Wanning exhaled shakily. “Your project is too focused on biomechanics. I’m not up-to-date enough with the current literature to adequately advise you regarding the layout of the field. This morning I contacted Hua Binan, in the Medical Faculty, and he has agreed to take you on.”

Shi Mei’s eyelids fluttered closed.

“You’ll remember I introduced you to him at the nanotech conference in September. He was my own student when he was a doctoral candidate, so you won’t find any great deal of culture shock in the move. I think this works best for everyone.”

Shi Mei nodded wordlessly.

“Good. Good.” Chu Wanning looked like he was about to say something, and thought better of it. “Well. If your project needs an overhaul and you need more time, of course I’ll co-sign any bursary applications. I’m afraid I have meetings for the rest of the day, so I’ll… He’s expecting you on Monday.”

Then Chu Wanning turned to go.

Mo Ran crossed the space between them in four strides and grabbed Chu Wanning’s wrist to yank him back. Even in his rage, something in his brain registered how the bones ground together in his grip, how easily his fingers met.

“What the *fuck* is the matter with you?” he said, pushing into Chu Wanning’s space, making him arch his neck just to maintain eye contact with him.

“A-Ran!” Shi Mei shouted behind him.

This close up, Chu Wanning’s eyes had flecks of gold in them, and more rage than Mo Ran had ever seen in another person. There was a small split in his lower lip. He tried to tug his wrist free, and his eyes widened slightly when he couldn’t. His pupils shrank to pinpricks.

“*Mo Ran*,” he said.

Mo Ran blinked and let go.

He stepped back, not quite knowing why, but his heart had begun to pound in his chest. Anger, he reasoned. Anger and dread. Chu Wanning had never sounded like that before.

Chu Wanning lifted his chin; he was the shortest man in the room, but he was the image of outraged elegance. “That is the first and last time you ever lay a finger on me,” he said quietly. “Do you understand?”

Mo Ran became vaguely aware of Shi Mei tugging on his arm. He nodded dumbly.

“Come *on*,” Shi Mei said, and Chu Wanning finally deigned to look back at him. The expression on his face curdled, and he swept out so quickly his labcoat flapped behind him.

Chapter 5: The Opposite of an Amputation

Chapter Notes

> All Chu Wanning know is stalk out of awkward conversations, have mental breakdown, and lie...

One of the major difficulties of dramatically storming out of an awkward conversation is the question of where to go next.

Chu Wanning passed through the lunch hour in a strange daze. He couldn't bear the thought of eating, and the early-December temperatures meant it was too cold to linger outside. He obviously couldn't wait in the XS laboratory for his afternoon meeting.

Mo Ran and Shi Mingjing might still be there. He would have to walk past them to reach his own office, and the thought of that was truly unbearable.

Instead he found his way to the Humanities Library, reasoning that no one would think to look for him there. But there were too many students, too many who clearly knew him by sight, because his unexpected intrusion set the air aflame with whispers. He took out the first book he saw – a new edition of Du Guangting's commentary on the *Dao De Ching*, just to have an excuse for being there – and made an equally swift escape.

He ended up in a cubicle in the bathroom of the Literature corridor. He wasn't *hiding*, his pride wouldn't allow him to even think that word; he just needed to be *quiet* and *alone* so that he could think through what just happened. So that he could try to marshal his strength to fill the gaping, aching void in his chest.

It was the first time Mo Ran had ever touched him.

It was the first time Chu Wanning had felt his skin on his own, and it had been in anger. In anger, and in defence of Shi Mingjing.

He always tried to assure himself that his secret favouritism of Mo Ran was due to the young man's difficult background, to his unexpected intelligence and his sense of humour and his easy manner.

The truth was rather more embarrassing. Xue Meng had always been expected to ask Chu Wanning to supervise him, due to Xue Zhengyong's influence. Hua Binan and Shi Mingjing had been supervised by him because no one else would take them on.

Mo Ran was the only person who had ever applied to be supervised by him.

Truly pathetic.

The feeling of *being chosen* had made him like the youth from the start, and made it easy to give him so many extra hours of tuition, hundreds of extra hours, to bring Mo Ran up to the pace of his peers. But over time that liking had turned into something much more irrational. Sometimes it was like a fever, making him delirious when the hem of Mo Ran's t-shirt rose up to give him a glimpse of golden skin and perfect musculature, the accompanying shame making his own thin skin unbearably hot.

More recently, it was like a wound.

Every true academic and scientist required an unexpected personal quality: what the mathematician Jacob Bronowski called "a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence". What was known was not to be worshipped uncritically, but challenged and questioned.

Mo Ran had had that quality, and he had had it to an intoxicating degree. It had made Chu Wanning's heart light to see him bring it to his studies. But somewhere along the way, he had gone wrong as a teacher. Mo Ran's irreverence had turned into arrogance, which had brought complacency with it. He was more likely to put his effort into showing off for Shi Mingjing than into his work.

Instead of challenging what Chu Wanning taught, or what he encouraged Mo Ran to learn about himself, he had begun to chafe and push and challenge Chu Wanning instead. Chu Wanning did not mind being challenged at all, and expected it from his students, but Mo Ran's challenges were not intellectual ones. There were emotional, and since beginning his Masters' he had become ever more obviously resentful of Chu Wanning's flaws and expectations, ever more prone to take the easiest or laziest route.

But until yesterday, he had never been outright dishonest. And he had never physically demonstrated his anger.

Chu Wanning's hands were shaking. He had asked Mo Ran to stay for the conversation with Shi Mingjing for his own protection, trusting thoughtlessly - of course he could trust *Mo Ran*. But could he? Mo Ran had shown himself to be deceitful, completely at odds with Chu Wanning's instinctive trust in him.

He was an idiot. What a fool, to be taken in by those beautiful dark eyes and dimpled grin. Had he learnt nothing in all his many years? Had he learnt nothing from his final conversation with Rong Yan, her last lesson to him?

No, he had trusted Mo Ran to protect *him* from Shi Mingjing, and instead found himself the focus of their shared hatred. He had – *say it* – panicked. His heart was still racing, thumping erratically against his ribs, and his fingers trembled as he dug for his propranolol tablets. He had found himself face-to-face with Mo Ran's collarbone. He could *feel* Shi Mingjing's eyes on him, and suddenly he was no longer Professor Chu Wanning. He was a terrified child, outnumbered. At least this time he had been able to pull together his dignity and flee.

Mo Ran's anger felt like a knife-wound to his chest, and of course, he would know. He felt it like something physical, his hurt a solid object lodged between his ribs, and yet that wasn't even the thing that itched in between his brain and his skull.

He curled his fingers around his wrist, mimicking the red-hot manacle branded there. He tugged at it himself, and then pulled his wrist back.

How *strong* was Mo Ran? He had known he *would* be strong, of course – the tight black t-shirts his student favoured left very little to the imagination in terms of physique – but feeling it was something different altogether.

He had tried to pull free, and Mo Ran hadn't moved. His muscles had barely tensed. And that was with just one hand...

The difference in strength should have stunned him. When Shi Mingjing had grabbed him, he had been shocked. He had been outraged and confused.

As he had been when Mo Ran had captured him. But unlike with Shi Mingjing, beneath those painfully familiar feelings, there was some other strange emotion that he couldn't quite pin down. Something thick and heavy and warm, something adjacent to *relaxed*, of all things, something not quite excited but oddly akin to it. Something that made him want to bare his neck and shift his hips, and dare Mo Ran to show him *more*.

It was almost like satisfaction. As though Mo Ran had finally done something that Chu Wanning had never even imagined he wanted.

He imagined it now. No just one wrist captured, but both – Mo Ran's hands were so big that he could hold both of Chu Wanning's wrists in one, and that thought really did make something spark and move behind his hips.

That sensation was so rare that Chu Wanning could only blink in astonishment. The unfamiliar experience made him feel nauseous, his body registering his shame just before his mind did.

Sick! He was sick in the head. Why on earth would *that* thought- How utterly shameless!

He was distracted by the door to the toilets banging open. For a terrible long second Chu Wanning thought, with an icy chill down his back, that he might have accidentally gone into the Ladies' in his distress. But the voices, when they came, were deep and masculine:

"Did you see Chu Wanning just now?"

“It was like something out of a nightmare. His class gave me PTSD.”

“Hah, you fucked up, bro. Of all the professors to pick for your science module, and you went for White Spider Hands.”

“You know he was a child prodigy? I thought that would mean he’d be younger, you know, more understanding.”

“Rookie mistake. Washed-up child prodigies are always bitter and twisted. He was probably crusty since birth. Some people are born old.”

“Dickhead. He has a mouth like a cat’s asshole. At least you learnt from my mistake and took Xuanji’s class from the start.”

Chu Wanning’s hand was on the bolt to storm out – a white spider, indeed. They would look terrified, and he would sneer down in contempt at the two students, letting them know that their words had meant nothing to him.

Then realisation soaked him like icy water.

If he left the cubicle without flushing… Well. He’d look absolutely disgusting. That, or they would intuit that he’d been hiding in there, like a sad, pathetic wretch.

Or worse. Like a creep.

But even if he flushed first, and then left, the two students would, even if just for half a second, would imagine- would *picture-*

It was a perfectly human activity, but one which Chu Wanning had no intention of ever indicating in any way. His flat might be a mess, but his bathroom was spotless.

He'd had this dilemma before, of course. Flushing the toilet to let a person listening outside know he was there… He could hear the long moment of silence, the cry, and sickening *thud-thud-thud.*

That *thud-thud-thud* was echoed in his chest. During his mortified dithering, the students had finished at the urinal. They'd left without even washing their hands – *disgusting!* – and rendered Chu Wanning's decision void.

He rushed out quickly, before anyone else came in; he washed his hands like a surgeon, and did *not* open the door by its handle, hooking his foot around it instead. So disgusting!

At least he'd spent enough time having a mental breakdown in a toilet cubicle that he could then go straight to the Heads of Department meeting. He sat down next to Xue Zhengyong, the only person whose closeness he could possibly bear at that moment.

Xue Zhengyong poured some water for him. At the other end of the table, Professors Lucan and Xuanji were already in conversation. "You all right, Yuheng?" he asked quietly.

"Fine." Chu Wanning nodded his thanks for the water.

"If there is anything, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Of course. There's nothing though. I'm fine." Guilt churned in his stomach.

"Right… My door is always open, my phone's always on. Any time, day or night."

"Xue Zhengyong, I'm absolutely fine."

Xue Zhengyong nodded reluctantly. “Why don’t you come over tomorrow for dinner? Wifey will make something northern.”

“I’m sorry, I have plans.” Plans to draw the blinds and see no one for forty-eight hours. “Another time, though. Thank you.”

“*Any* time,” Xue Zhengyong said, and then smiled across Chu Wanning at the other professors coming in. “Hello, everyone, hello! Have a seat, there, would you like some water?”

Chu Wanning looked up, and blinked in surprise.

Subconsciously he had recorded who was attending, and thought that they were still waiting on Dr. Tanlang; this was a regular occurrence, as Tanlang was one of those obnoxious people who thought that making a meeting wait for him to begin gave him face.

But the person who walked through the door was Hua Binan.

“Dr. Tanlang sends his apologies,” Hua Binan said. “He asked if I could come on his behalf, please excuse the intrusion.”

“No intrusion at all,” Xue Zhengyong said. “Dr…?”

“Hua,” Chu Wanning supplied. “My first student, before he moved to Medicine.”

“Ah, well, we won’t hold that against him! Please, sit down, Dr. Hua – would you like some water?” The small hospital in Wuchang wasn’t big enough for the medical school to operate from, so they were based in the central hospital of Ya’an, about three hours away, halfway between Sisheng and Chengdu. “It was quite a drive for you!”

How strange, that Hua Binan should be replacing Tanlang today, of all days. Had Chu Wanning known he'd be attending the HoD meeting, he'd have asked him about Shi Mingjing in person.

Neither he nor Hua Binan had chosen the other for doctoral supervision; they were more like the two least popular horses roped together to pull the least valuable carriage in a parade. Hua Binan had been rather like Shi Mingjing – marks too low to persuade any other supervisor to take the risk on him – and Chu Wanning was fresh to Sisheng from the court ruling and his government blacklisting, and in his mid-twenties besides. No one wanted to be supervised by someone younger than themselves, after all; even if one's ego was humble enough that one could bear to take orders from a peer, it didn't exactly inspire confidence.

Despite all expectations, they had made the partnership work, and Hua Binan had successfully graduated with his doctorate. He had gone to work for Guyueye Pharmaceutical Company, a path from which Chu Wanning had attempted to dissuade him, as rumours were that Guyueye had made much of its fortune from the use of unethical data obtained from arrested activists and prisoners of conscience. To put it mildly. But Hua Binan had gone, and no one could deny that in terms of his career it had been an excellent decision. He had largely moved from medical engineering to pharmacological development, and his ascent within Guyueye had been dizzying.

Hua Binan had presumably taken up a year's post in Ya'an to keep his hand in in terms of medical practicalities, and Chu Wanning could only be grateful that he had. He had called his former student that morning, and Hua Binan had been more than happy to take on a doctoral candidate, even one so close to finishing.

As the meeting began in earnest, Chu Wanning's surprise at Hua Binan's presence faded quickly. Hua Binan's humility in accepting him as his supervisor had impressed him, but he and Chu Wanning had never warmed to each other. He couldn't fault Hua Binan's politeness, but there was always a distance between them. Hua Binan habitually hid some deep emotion behind a gentle smile, some feeling engendered by Chu Wanning's presence, and Chu Wanning was certain that it must be a very strong dislike. Occasionally he saw a flash of something wild and fiery in Hua Binan's eyes when Chu Wanning spoke too passionately or too long. It hurt him to see it, but it was the usual response from people when Chu Wanning let his tongue run away from him, and he redoubled his efforts to silence himself and not place further pressure on Hua Binan to hide his impatience with his supervisor.

And from Chu Wanning's side, he couldn't deny that Hua Binan's beautiful looks and popular personality churned a bitter envy in him, one which he sought to hide in turn.

Chu Wanning was not very good at articulating his feelings, but he had the horrible and probably unjust sense there was something manipulative and deceitful about Hua Binan – he was only able to identify even that when he tried to think of why Hua Binan gave him the same feeling that Nangong Liu had used to: the sensation of walking on slippery ice. The impression was nowhere near as deep, of course, and Chu Wanning felt guilty that he could even compare the two men, but once he had identified the sensation, he was forced to admit that Hua Binan's easy softness made him… wary. Vulnerable.

With neither young man wishing to show their own feelings about the other, they had maintained a polite façade, talking perfectly happily about intellectual or practical matters, but rarely delving into anything deeper.

His mind should have been on the pros and cons of a new student accommodation block, or the forthcoming university rankings release.

It was not.

If *Mo Ran* had been the one to shove him against a whiteboard and kiss him....

He'd have fought him, of course. He'd struggle and claw and kick, but…

But.... The knowledge that it would have been useless to do so, if Mo Ran had *really* wanted to hold him... That knowledge should have scared him. But it didn't. He felt something in his chest ease at the thought.

He'd be completely unable to stop Mo Ran from kissing him, a fact clear to anyone with working eyes, and that meant that he wasn't responsible. It wouldn't, *couldn't*, be his fault. Whatever Mo Ran did, Chu Wanning would just have to take it.

He shifted his in chair, and clenched all the muscles in his legs. *Stop it!*

This was all just a horrible after-effect of Shi Mingjing's actions yesterday. It had put him out of sorts, that was all. He wasn't used to being touched, and now he was... Disconcerted. A little disturbed... but who wouldn't be? It was very normal, he tried to reassure himself. This was just his brain trying to work through the new semantic errors, and throwing up anomalous results. He barely even *thought* about his, his, *private area,* and then it had been touched so violently and unexpectedly, so it made sense that he would be more aware of it than usual, right?

Of course - yesterday Shi Mingjing had grabbed his wrist and touched his- well, placed his hand over- cupped?- no, that was a worse word - had *interacted*- no, even worse again - had 'placed his hand over' that place, and so today, when Mo Ran had also grabbed his wrist, his body had extrapolated based on previous events. A ghost sensation. Like… the opposite of an amputation. An unexpected limb exciting an expected response.

That was all. He nearly smiled to himself in relief. That all made perfect sense.

The meeting was drawing to a close. Chu Wanning had barely contributed ten words. Everyone was getting up, and Chu Wanning was as fast as he could be in the race out of the door and down the corridor.

Not fast enough. Hua Binan was irritatingly taller than him, and managed to catch up to fall in step beside him. "It's good to see you, Chu-*laoshi*."

It would be unconscionably rude to continue walking. "Mn." He stopped, and turned, but couldn't quite work up the energy to make eye contact; his gaze drifted along the skirting board instead. "And you. I'm sorry for bothering you on the phone this morning. I'd have asked you about Shi Mingjing in person, if I'd known you were coming."

"Dr. Tanlang asked me just after we hung up. I just had enough time to drive over. Chu-*laoshi*… Are you all right?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" Chu Wanning snapped, finally looking up in defiance.

“Ah...” Hua Binan looked embarrassed. “Um. You were...” He rocked back and forth, a tiny amount, and clenched and unclenched his fist.

Shame washed over Chu Wanning like a wave of scalding water. He turned and began to walk away, not caring how rude it was.

He was more upset than he had realised, if he’d done *that* during the meeting. He usually managed to catch and smother those childish habits before anyone else noticed. They had infuriated Huaizui, who preferred meditative stillness around himself, and by the time he had gone to Rufeng, when the electricity under his skin was too much to bear he usually tightened and released his abdominal or leg muscles instead.

“Chu Wanning! Please, it’s all right,” Hua Binan said, and gripped Chu Wanning’s wrist.

Chu Wanning would often go for months without being touched by another human being, but this was the third time someone had grabbed him in twenty-four hours, and he'd run out of patience. He threw Hua Binan off and *hissed*.

“Don’t touch me!”

“I’m sorry – I’m sorry, I know you don’t like it,” Hua Binan said, holding up his hands in immediate surrender.

“No, I don’t. I have to go. I’m grateful for you taking on Shi Mingjing, but I- I have another meeting. A student. I have to go. We’ll talk later.”

“Of course. I’m sorry again, Chu-*laoshi*.”

Chu Wanning left Hua Binan in the middle of the corridor, looking bashfully chastened. As he stalked away, he rubbed his wrist, and felt a pang of enraged grief that Hua Binan had overwritten the sensation of Mo Ran’s touch.

Chapter 6: Devil on the Shoulder

Chapter Notes

> It has been a really shitty week at work, so your reading and your comments are doubly, triply appreciated! Thank you so much!

On Saturday evening, Mo Ran attended the Xues' regular weekend family meal. Lately he had skipped it more often than not, accepting invitations from Shi Mei or Rong Jiu to go out to a restaurant or a bar, or simply to hang out alone in his flat.

They were delighted to see him, and Mo Ran had felt a pang of guilt when he saw that a place had already been set for him. Xue Meng was in a foul mood, either eating in sullen silence or answering questions with monosyllabic answers, but Xue Zhengyong had rescued the meal with his usual loud grace.

Mo Ran waited until Xue Meng had left to ask for a favour, having volunteered to wash the dishes. "I was wondering whether I might be able to borrow one of the cars tomorrow?"

"Of course," Xue Zhengyong said. He was pouring out small glasses of Fengjiu baijiu for them all. "As I've said before, say the word, and you can have one!"

"Ah, it'd be too much work, to keep finding somewhere safe to park it. You know what it's like outside my flat…" They didn't, despite paying the monthly rent for it.

"Well, you can borrow one whenever you like. You're going out for a drive?"

"Shi Mei's found a room in Ya'an. One of those buildings for medical students. He needs someone to drive his stuff." He didn't miss the look his aunt and uncle shared. "What?"

“Nothing. So, he’s going to Ya’an for certain, then?” Xue Zhengyong said, voice light and nonchalant.

Auntie Wang shot him an incredulous look.

Mo Ran shook bubbles from his hands, a little more sharply than strictly necessary. “So you know? About Chu Wanning sending him away?”

“Of course. I had to sign off on it.”

“Did he tell you why?”

Xue Zhengyong frowned. “He’s not comfortable in the biomechanical turn your friend’s project took.”

“Right. So he just throws Shi Mei away, six months from finishing. Now he’s going to need a new project, probably, more time…”

“I’m sure Yuheng is doing what he thinks is best for everyone,” Xue Zhengyong said.

“Doing what’s best for his career, more like.”

“He’s not like that. He’s never been like that, Ran'er.” Xue Zhengyong smiled. “Look, leave the washing, I’ll do it tomorrow-“

Auntie Wang sighed. “You won’t.”

“- sit down, have a drink with your uncle. I feel like we barely see you, nowadays. I’ll tell you about Yuheng – did you know, he was just sixteen when we first met? It was just a

couple of days after his birthday. Delicate, pale little thing, he must have been quite soon out of the hosp-“

“*Lao gong*!” Auntie Wang hissed.

Xue Zhengyong coughed. “I mean, we were at a conference in Hong Kong-“

“He was in the hospital? Why? What for?” Mo Ran felt a strange jolt through his stomach. He hadn’t known that Chu Wanning had ever been ill enough to be hospitalised; he tended to get sick often during the winter, in the cold mountain air, but as far as he knew he’d never needed to spend time in the hospital. Was this when he was at Rufeng?

“It doesn’t matter, not important. In any case, he was there with his own supervisor, youngest person there by miles. The keynote speaker was this fellow from Guyueye, and he was spreading some bullshit about their marvellous collection of medical data, and when the time came for questions, Yuheng stood up – his voice broke right in the middle of his sentence, haha! Barely sixteen, remember? – and called him out, right there in front of everyone, about the 2009 settlement and the 2011 settlement. They’d been sued for experimenting on pregnant women without consent, giving them and the babies Butterfly Bone Syndrome, you know? Caused a complete uproar. And his supervisor – Rong Yan from Rufeng, marvellous, marvellous woman – just sat back and looked so proud of him. They were a wonderful pair. Righteous to a fault, but completely unapologetic. A woman and a teenager, in this room full of furious men, and they acted like they didn’t have a care in the world. Walked out with their heads held high, and I ran out after them.”

Mo Ran downed his baijiu in one swallow. “Well. That was a long time ago, wasn’t it? People change.”

“Eh, twelve, thirteen years. Rong Yan died a few months after that, of course, and that’s why Yuheng left Rufeng. He’d have stayed with her, otherwise. And he hasn’t changed a bit.” He smiled sadly. “Well, mostly.”

“Yeah. He’s not delicate now, is he? He’s made of steel.”

“Not in the least, Mo Ran… I wish I knew what went wrong between you two, eh? You used to love him so much.”

Mo Ran stood up then. He couldn’t bear the way his uncle and aunt were looking at him.

“Got to know him, I suppose. Thanks for lending me the car.”

*

“Thank you for driving me, A-Ran.”

“Of course.” The room was clean, but small, and bare. A small kitchen counter, a single bed, an old wardrobe… And Shi Mei would be alone here, three hours away from his friends.

Without anywhere else to put them, Mo Ran wheeled Shi Mei’s suitcases into a corner. Outside, the sun was setting. “You can see a little bit of the river, look! It… it won’t be so bad…”

“Hm.” Shi Mei was pulling the caps off two beers. “Only one, as you’re driving back. But to say thanks.”

Mo Ran smiled helplessly. “I told you, no need. Your company was more than thanks enough.”

“I barely spoke,” Shi Mei said with a sad smile. He perched on the thin mattress. “Not good company at all.”

“You don’t need to speak to be good company,” Mo Ran said. He looked away, taking a swig of beer, and swallowed painfully. “… this is such bullshit, Shi Mei.”

“It could be worse. Really.”

“Not the room… Why do I feel like…” He struggled to put the horrible feeling into words. “Why do I feel like I’m the only one who doesn’t know what’s really going on? Am I just being stupid, or is everyone lying to me? Because it’s *bullshit*. If Chu Wanning didn’t feel ‘confident with biomechanics’ or whatever, he wouldn’t sleep until he was the world expert in it. Out of pure fucking pride! He’d never admit to not being competent in something.”

Shi Mei put down his beer. “A-Ran, please. You’re right, it’s not the whole story, but can we just leave it?”

“No! No, if there’s something going on, don’t I deserve to know?”

“It’s better if you don’t.”

“Why? That’s-“ Mo Ran swallowed tightly. “That’s never true, Shi Mei. It’s always better to know.”

Shi Mei shook his head. “It really isn’t. It’ll be awkward for you, A-Ran. You still have to… You have your own degree to think of.”

“Fuck my degree. You’re scaring me. What happened?”

Shi Mei drew a shuddering breath. He lifted his chin, as though preparing for a blow, and seeing his beautiful, gentle face, with such sad, soft eyes, Mo Ran felt overwhelmed with protectiveness.

“Chu-*laoshi*… kissed me.”

Mo Ran blinked.

“But… what?”

“Chu Wanning. He kissed me.”

Mo Ran blinked again, as thought that would make what Shi Mei had just said make sense. His brain refused to comprehend the sentence. It slipped off his cortex like water off a duck’s back, not making the least impression on his consciousness. “Chu Wanning… *kissed*…”

“Me. Yes. For the third time.”

“But…”

The idea of Chu Wanning kissing anyone was bad enough. Mo Ran tried to picture it, and it felt like Chu Wanning himself was whipping him, right between the eyes. Did he lean in, or shove forward? Either seemed equally impossible. Eyes closed or open? Mouth- Fuck, it made no sense!

And then for him to kiss *Shi Mei*-

Shi Mei, whose beautiful face was twisting. “I knew it. I *told* you, A-Ran, that no one would believe me, and you said, ‘*I’ll always believe you*’. I can’t believe I trusted you, I *knew*-“

“No!” Mo Ran fell to his knees, dropping his bottle on the floor in his haste to take Shi Mei’s hands. “No, no, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I was just so shocked! Of course I believe you!”

“You don’t,” Shi Mei said, looking up and blinking wildly. Mo Ran had made him cry. He had made Shi Mei *cry*.

“I *do*. When did this this happen? Wait – on Thursday? Thursday afternoon?”

Shi Mei nodded. “It was so sudden. I was standing at the whiteboard, showing where in my plan I’d written to, and when I turned around he was so close, and I- I didn’t want to hurt him. I pushed him away, but then he…”

Shi Mei’s eyelids trembled closed. “I made it clear that however much I admired him, I didn’t… Not in that way. That… That I liked… It never even *occurred* to me that Chu-*laoshi* might be, you know, that way inclined. *Any* way inclined. I suppose I thought that he just had no interest in any of that, being, you know. What he is. Maybe it’s my fault, I shouldn’t have assumed…”

“If you made an assumption, it’s because it’s *Chu Wanning*. He’s… completely sexless. Carved from stone. He barely counts as a human being.” Mo Ran needed to make up for his earlier disbelief. “Clearly it was all an act. Hiding it.”

“I genuinely thought he… he took me on to help me. Because he liked my project idea…” Shi Mei said in a small voice.

“Your project is *amazing*. He probably did, he probably only… only started thinking of that kind of thing later. You’re very easy to fall in love with, Shi Mei,” Mo Ran said with a smile, but this wasn’t the time. He settled for stroking the back of Shi Mei’s hand with his thumb. “When you pushed him away, what did he say?”

“That… He never actually *said* that it was… I don’t know. Required. That if I didn’t do anything with him that he’d let me go. But he said ‘If you want to stay in this laboratory’, and then just trailed off.”

“I don’t think you could get much more clear than that!” Mo Ran felt *ill* with rage. He tried to imagine Chu Wanning’s face saying this, tried to picture the sneering curl of his lip, the haughty untouchability in his eyes. “Did he say anything else?”

Shi Mei shook his head. “Did he need to? I mean, we’re all intelligent. We know how this plays out.”

Mo Ran had never felt hatred like this before. He had thought he'd hated the Mo family, but this – this was thicker, heavier, deeper. The image of Shi Mei and Chu Wanning, kissing – no, no, Chu Wanning taking advantage like that. The fucking *hypocrite*. Pretending to be as pure as driven snow, pretending to be so high and mighty, pretending to be so fucking innocent, pretending to be *better than him*, and all the while he'd been biding his time. "Yeah, it plays out with you reporting the motherfucker."

Shi Mei laughed bitterly. "Right. Yes. That'll go down well. The terrible-but-pretty student – don't deny it, A-Ran, I know that's not how *you* think of me, but that's my reputation – versus the word of… well. As you said. The Sexless Savant. The unimpeachable, untouchable, uptight-" Shi Mei bit his lip, as though he didn't want to say this about his teacher even ironically. He was so *good*. "Chu Wanning is famous. Everyone knows how… incorruptible he is. Who's anyone going to believe?"

"You," Mo Ran said, but he knew that he was right. Shi Mei was disposable to Sisheng; Chu Wanning was not. "It makes me fucking *sick*. I knew he was too good to be true. I've said it so many times – that no one in the world is that altruistic. The court case, the fucking Night Guardians. It was all an act, to hide what he was really thinking. Planning."

Shi Mei… Shi Mei touched his cheek.

It was just for a moment, but it burnt Mo Ran's skin. He looked back into Shi Mei's long-lashed eyes in astonishment.

"It means so much to have someone who believes me," Shi Mei whispered. "Someone on my side."

Mo Ran couldn't resist it; he threw his arms around Shi Mei, and just as quickly threw himself back, landing painfully on the floor. "Oh, fuck, I'm sorry! Shit! That's the last thing you want- fuck, I'm so sorry, Shi Mei!"

Shi Mei laughed, a gentle, sincere little laugh this time, and shook his head. "No, no. I don't mind *you* giving me a hug, A-Ran. No, I… It means so much. If only you believe me, it doesn't matter that he'll get away with it – I mean, it does matter, but not as much."

“It matters a lot! Don’t give up. I can’t believe I ever looked up to him. Evil *bastard*.”

Shi Mei sighed. “You’re the first one who realised it, out of all of us. Xue Meng never will, he’s too blinded by hero worship. He’d never believe us, or he’d twist it to make it my fault, somehow. But I was blind to him as well. You were the only one.”

Mo Ran shook his head modestly. “Nah, I’m just… a petty dickhead. ‘With issues around authority’. Can’t forget that.”

“No. You were cleverer than all of us. You saw through him. I’m sorry, A-Ran. I should have stood up for you more, when he was so strict on you, when he was so uncaring. I thought that we had to make exceptions for him. To consider that he processed things differently, you know, didn’t feel the normal spectrum of emotions. Didn’t express them properly. But that was no excuse.”

He'd been taken in by that as well. Chu Wanning, the robot. “It doesn’t matter now. We’re a team. You being a couple of hours down the road isn’t going to change that.”

Shi Mei smiled. “I know. I know that, now. Ah…” He wiped at his eyes with one hand, and squeezed Mo Ran’s with the other. “You almost make me feel as though we could do it, together. Make people believe us.”

“We can try.”

Shi Mei shook his head again. “It would make things so awkward for you, with your family. It would never work. I could only *ever* imagine it working if…”

Mo Ran looked at him, gears turning slowly. “If…?”

Shi Mei blinked at him. “If… If it weren’t just me…”

“If- If he’d done it to someone else. Shit. Shit! Yeah – if it was more than one person-!”

Shi Mei nodded. “Exactly. But I don’t know how we’d ever find a person he’d done it to already. He’d have said the same thing to them, of course. I, I’m not so vain as to think it’s only me-“

“It could be. You’re so good-looking,” Mo Ran said, but he was too distracted to even watch out for what Shi Mei’s reaction to this was. “But if it wasn’t… You’re right, I don’t know how we could discover…”

But if you couldn’t *discover*, you could *fabricate*.

“If there was someone else,” he said carefully. “If I could… *find* someone else. Would you report him then?”

Shi Mei blinked, lost in thought for a second. “I think so. Yes. Because that would mean he’d eventually do it to someone else, wouldn’t he? It’d… We wouldn’t just be doing it for me, then. It’d be protecting other students.”

Mo Ran nodded eagerly; fuck the other students, for all he cared: bringing down Chu Wanning and finding justice for Shi Mei were the only things that mattered. “Right, right, yeah, exactly. God, you’re so fucking kind. Right, yes. I mean, it might take a while. To find someone.”

Shi Mei nodded, but the amused look he gave was very sad. “A-Ran, I don’t think even you’ll be able to find someone. But if anyone can, it’s you.”

Oh, Mo Ran was going to find someone, all right. He felt *alive*, bursting with energy; his idea had turned into electricity and light in his veins.

Fuck, it was already Sunday evening; he’d be seeing Chu Wanning in the morning. He had a hell of a lot of work to do before then. “I need to drive back – will you be okay? You’ll be

okay?”

“I will be now,” Shi Mei said, with the softest, sweetest smile.

Chapter 7: Awkward Apologies

When Mo Ran cycled to the lab the next morning, he was so tired he felt nauseated. He'd worked himself into a blind fury while making the drive back from Ya'an, until he nearly careened off one of the sharp mountain bends. He'd parked the car, hands shaking, and punched the steering wheel.

"Fuck! Fucking- That hypocritical *bastard*."

It wasn't just hatred, he realised, sitting in the darkness high above a valley in the Daxue mountains. It was disillusionment. He'd honestly thought that he was as realistic about human nature as it was possible to be, that any naivety and innocence had been burnt out of him, but he felt… *hurt*.

It *hurt*, that Chu Wanning had been pretending to be so good. Mo Ran, like a fucking idiot, had actually *believed* that a single person in the world might truly, genuinely, sincerely be an altruist, that someone really would put humanity before themselves. That someone, anyone, would want to do good, *be* good, even if it meant they suffered in the process. That someone actually gave a fuck about the helpless and the downtrodden.

But no. It was all an act, to cover the fact that Chu Wanning was really the kind of man who thought he could pressure his student into sex. Every time he'd told Mo Ran off for making sexual jokes in the lab: an act. He'd thought Chu Wanning was a prude, but maybe he'd been hitting a little too close to the mark instead.

No. It turned out that the court case, the Night Guardians, all the lofty, haughty speeches about responsibility and integrity – all lies. It was all just shit, to cover up his real self.

Mo Ran wound the window down, despite the freezing temperatures. He needed a clear head. He needed to turn his fire into ice, and bank his rage. He had a plan. He needed to carry it out. Then he'd get justice for Shi Mei, and the whole world would know what Chu Wanning really was.

He dropped the car back off at the Xues' and then went to his flat. He worked through most of the night, managing a couple of hours of sleep before dawn, and then cycled to the lab with a brief stop at a shop in town.

Mo Ran's aim was to reach the lab before Xue Meng but after Chu Wanning, and he had timed it perfectly.

He looked through the small window in the door. Chu Wanning's face was lit in shades of blue from one of his monitors, sketching out the sharp planes of his face. His desk was, as always, a complete mess of books and papers, or small cogs and parts that he was working on. The same was true of the floor between the desk and the window. The shelf behind him was tidier, of course, because it was where he kept all of his awards. Glass and metal, shaped like rockets or starburst or spheres… Urgh. Incongruous amongst them was a small penjing display: a jade-coloured pot and a little tree with a single pinkish blossom.

Mo Ran indulged in a momentary daydream of setting the whole thing on fire. Preferably with Chu Wanning locked inside.

The bastard himself was frowning at something, typing quickly, a pen bitten between his teeth.

That pen, that fucking pen, did things to him. Completely unbidden came the image of Chu Wanning with a gag between his teeth, looking up at Mo Ran with fury and fear. His treacherous, amoral cock twitched at the thought, and Mo Ran desperately scrubbed the thought from his mind. The last thing he needed as part of his apologetic, submissive act was a fucking boner.

Chu Wanning caught sight of him through the glass, and his thin lips thinned further. Mo Ran saw him almost imperceptibly inhale and exhale, and then wave him in.

Good to know that he wasn't the only one who needed to steel himself for this conversation.

"Door open, please."

“Sure,” Mo Ran said casually. *Oh, worried about that now, are we? We’ll see how long that lasts.* “I, er…”

Chu Wanning stared at him with one eyebrow raised, face like a frozen lake. “Well? Out with it.”

Why have I wasted so much time on you? Mo Ran cleared his throat. “I wanted to apologise.”

Chu Wanning sat back in his chair. “For what, exactly?”

Mo Ran huffed a laugh. “Yeah, that’s fair… I mean, first and foremost, for grabbing you on Friday. Shouting. However angry I was, that wasn’t on. And I know you could have reported me, and- I mean, you still could-“

“I haven’t,” Chu Wanning said. “And I do not intend to, as long as there is no repetition.”

“Ah, great. Great. Thank you. I mean… I am sorry. Genuinely. For that.” He paused for a second. “I drove Shi Mei to his new room in Ya’an, yesterday. He told me everything.”

It was dumb, but he *needed* to see Chu Wanning’s reaction. It didn’t disappoint. Already pale, Chu Wanning’s blood drained from his face, and his phoenix eyes were wide.

Mo Ran let him sit in his dread for a second before he broke the stretching silence with a smile. “He gave me *such* a telling-off. Said that you’d both been discussing a change of supervisor for months, with all the medical stuff he’s doing, and I’d just waded in like a fucking idiot without a clue.”

He decided to twist the knife, just a little. “He was right. I overreacted, barrelled in without even asking… He said how kind you’ve been, how you’ve been looking out for him. For both of us. I should have had more faith.”

Chu Wanning was wearing a white shirt under a dove grey jumper; the top button of the shirt was undone, and Mo Ran could see Chu Wanning's adam's apple bob as he swallowed. "Mn. Well. I accept your apology, Mo Ran."

"One down, two to go. I also wanted to apologise for plagarising that abstract, and then for lying to you about it." Mo Ran had to kill his smirk – he looked down at the floor instead, hunched his shoulders a little. "I wrote a new one over the weekend. I've e-mailed it to you, so you can run a keyword search more easily. To show that I've not… I mean, if you wouldn't mind looking at it."

Chu Wanning looked like he was softening, just a little, with the threat of his assault of Shi Mei being revealed apparently in the rearview mirror. "Of course I will."

"And, last of all, I'm sorry about your mug."

Chu Wanning exhaled and shook his head. "It's fine."

"I hope it didn't have sentimental value." As though Chu Wanning had something as human as a single sentiment.

Chu Wanning shook his head. He was opening his e-mail, presumably to check that Mo Ran really had sent a new abstract to him, and so didn't notice for a second the thing that Mo Ran was holding out for him.

He'd picked out gaudiest, girliest mug he could see – it was white, but embossed all over with gold butterflies and orchids. Mo Ran inwardly hugged himself in glee when Chu Wanning's eyes widened slightly in horror.

"I don't know, I saw it and it just made me think of you."

Chu Wanning looked up at him as though he was wondering whether he needed to call a mental health professional for him. “You shouldn’t have…”

“Ah, no, I had to. I’m so sorry I smashed your other one, Chu-*laoshi*. Please forgive me.”

Chu Wanning took the mug as though he was worried it was about to explode in his hand. The butterflies flashed showily in the light as he turned it. “Thank you…?”

“Not at all. I’m sorry I was so angry. It’s something I’m working on, but I… well, backslide sometimes.” He blinked as though the thought upset him. “Social workers always said I needed to, you know, control myself better…”

Chu Wanning looked uncomfortable, and even the mug was apparently more interesting than Mo Ran’s face with that. “I understand. I… appreciate the gesture, Mo Ran.”

He ground out the words like they were physically painful. Mo Ran briefly imagined giving him a sharp kick to the shins, and instead shrugged, turned his smile away. Coy and embarrassed. “Did the abstract arrive?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, I see it,” Chu Wanning said, clearly relieved to have the opportunity to look at something other than the mug. “Atomic resolution imaging?”

“That’s it.”

Chu Wanning began to read it. His hand was on the mouse, but he didn’t move it; Mo Ran thought that he should be flattered that Chu Wanning wasn’t immediately running a keyword search to see where he might have stolen it from.

“It’s good.”

Whatever Mo Ran had been expecting, it hadn't included praise. He'd expected a sigh, possibly something in the realm of '*We can work on this'*. "What, really?"

"Yes. Original without being foolhardy, ambitious but realistic to achieve in the timeframe we have. Your prose has improved. One these citations is wrong, it should read 2017 instead of 2018, but that's easily remedied." He looked back at Mo Ran, and his eyes narrowed consideringly. "And easily missed, if one was writing it in the early hours of the morning…"

Mo Ran grinned. "How did you guess?"

"You look exhausted."

"Well, thank you," Mo Ran said, as Chu Wanning stood up.

He opened up a cabinet in one wall and switched on an electric kettle. "Sit down. Tea or coffee?"

This was new. "Coffee. Please. I didn't know you drank coffee."

"I don't."

"So you just… have it to offer to other people?"

"Mn. It is only polite."

"Right…"

Chu Wanning did indeed have coffee, a small jar of instant granules. No wonder he didn't drink it. "How do you have it? I have some sugar and soymilk."

“However.”

Chu Wanning looked at him with visible annoyance. “That is not an answer.”

Mo Ran nearly laughed. “A little milk, no sugar. Thanks.”

Chu Wanning made the coffee in a faded CNSA mug. Showing off, for sure. He added the soymilk as carefully as if he were dealing with explosives in a chem lab. He used the butterfly mug himself, out of that damn *politeness*, and crumbled some pu’erh tea from an actual brick for himself. Mo Ran made sure he was facing away before he rolled his eyes at the pretension.

He pretended to look through the tests he’d moved instead. Chu Wanning’s evil passing grades would mean that practically no one would pass his courses, save for the fact that he offered as many resits as the student needed to pass. It meant that he spent an hour and a half every Monday invigilating them. “How many this week?”

Chu Wanning looked at him warily as he took the other seat. “One for civil, one for microstructure processing, four for quantum.” He blew the surface of his tea, and watched as Mo Ran took a sip of coffee.

It was shit. But it was caffeine, and he’d only had time to buy a mug or buy a coffee that morning. He managed a smile. “Mm. I needed that…”

Chu Wanning gave a tiny nod of satisfaction, and tested his tea. He apparently decided it needed to brew for a little longer. “Mo Ran… Is there something else going on?”

Mo Ran choked on his second mouthful of coffee; he could feel the blister of a burn on the roof of his mouth. “What?”

“The stolen abstract. Your… emotional reactions. Is there something going on outside of the university?” Chu Wanning’s voice was just as cold and as flat as ever. “Some… I don’t know. Financial worries? Family issues?”

Mo Ran’s eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. Was Chu Wanning… attempting to be *pastoral*? “No. No, nothing.”

“Xue Meng has been quieter than usual, but that could be…” He cleared his throat delicately. “Your aunt and uncle are well?”

“Yeah. Yeah, fine. I had dinner with them on Saturday night.”

“Good. Well. Hm.”

Mo Ran gave him a lopsided smile. “Which means I have no excuse for being a massive prick, I’m afraid.”

Chu Wanning looked away, and sipped his tea. “You’ve apologised. As far as I’m concerned, that is the end of it.”

“You’re too kind, Chu-*laoshi*.”

He hadn’t been able to keep all the venom from his voice. Even Chu Wanning, normally oblivious to such things, had heard it; he looked up, and Mo Ran was already beaming at him. *You imagined it,* he telegraphed with his eyes. *You’re paranoid. All in your imagination. I’m harmless and grateful!*

Chu Wanning nodded. Reassuring himself, Mo Ran thought. “Not at all. Right, um… thank you again. For the mug… I have to go and invigilate.”

Mo Ran stood up. “Then it’s the Material Mathematics lecture, right?”

“Mn. Correct that citation, if you please, and start work on your introduction. Try to have a draft by the end of the week.”

He saluted. “*Shi,* Chu-*laoshi*! Here, I’ll wash up the mugs, I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

“I have arms,” Chu Wanning said. (He certainly did. Mo Ran remembered what he’d looked like with his sleeves rolled up last summer.)

“Of course. Sorry.”

Not bad, Mo Ran thought as he left. Not brilliant, but not bad. Getting on an even keel had only been Step One, and even his self-indulgence with the butterfly mug didn’t seem to have done too much damage.

The main thing that was causing him concern was that strange arousing image…

He’d have to be careful about *that* in the future. It was going to be difficult enough to seduce Chu Wanning without actually fancying him too.

Chapter 8: The Food of the True Revolutionary

The clock in the classroom that Chu Wanning had booked for his regular resit invigilations was ticking too loudly. It rang in his ears, thrummed in his pulse. Six students scribbled away.

He had already finished the tea he'd made for the test, and was now free to study the mug. He normally used his invigilation sessions to go over his afternoon's lectures, or those for the next morning, but today… Today he ran his finger along the thin porcelain rim of Mo Ran's gift.

His own face, stretched thin, stared back at him from the golden wings of the embossed butterflies.

Butterflies – why butterflies? What did butterflies mean? There was the dream of being a butterfly in the *Zhuangzi*, but that didn't fit. There were orchids too – *Butterflies in Love with Flowers*? But which one? Su Shi? Liu Yong? *My lover is worthy of desire*…

No! He recoiled from the thought. No. That really was pure idiocy. No, he knew Mo Ran. Even if he had meant something by it, did he really expect him to know classical poetry? Mo Weiyu?

No. If he had meant anything by it, it would have been that he thought Chu Wanning was prissy, fussy, stuck-up. Butterflies and orchids…

Pretty things. Elegant things. The gold flashed gaudily, showily… cheaply.

When Mo Ran had first arrived at the Xues' house, he'd been so entranced by the shininess and cleanliness. Sofas had soft cushions, walls had no stains. Lights worked and water was clear.

He had reminded Chu Wanning of himself when he had first gone to Huaizui's house. He too had been amazed by the lack of fighting, the space, the silence. The heaviness of porcelain

plates after plastic for so long had been difficult to grow used to; he'd broken many cups and plates, to Huaizui's anger. The single bed had felt so vast and cold with only one child in it instead of three. Even now, as an adult, he slept curled up on himself.

He suspected Xue Zhengyong had thought of it as well – another reason why he had asked Chu Wanning to be Mo Ran's tutor.

But Mo Ran had been in poverty for far longer than Chu Wanning had been. It would make sense that the old taste would remain for far longer too. As far as he knew Mo Ran had never been in one of the orphanages, but he had clearly been subject to a great deal of maltreatment and neglect by the time he was rediscovered.

His heart ached for Mo Ran. He rubbed a small mark from the wings of one of the butterflies.

Along with that tender ache there was a great deal of relief. Shi Mingjing had clearly taken Chu Wanning's gesture as it had been intended; he had recovered from the shock of the consequences and found a place to live.

Despite what he had done, he had been Chu Wanning's student, and he had hated the thought of Shi Mingjing at a loss or suffering. He'd been anxious all weekend about it; even the aunties he did tai chi chu'an with in People's Park on Sunday morning had noticed and asked him about it. But Shi Mingjing had told Mo Ran that they had agreed on the course of action together, and Mo Ran had accepted it, and even apologised.

It was all right. It would be all right.

He was distracted from his ruminations by one of the students. Luo Xianxian's head was bent over her test paper, and Chu Wanning clearly saw the fall of a tear onto the paper.

He went and tapped her on the shoulder. He had brought a pad of paper with him and quickly wrote: *Can pause time?*

She nodded gratefully. Chu Wanning gestured towards the door, and she nodded again.

He looked over the other students, and decided to take the risk. He led Luo Xianxian outside, and positioned himself so that he could look through the door's window.

When they were outside the classroom, Luo Xianxian's weeping doubled. Chu Wanning squirmed awkwardly, and pressed his embroidered handkerchief into her hands. "There," he said. "Is it the test? You know that you can use your equations sheet?"

"It's not the test – well, it's not *just* the test," she said, sobbing into the handkerchief. "It's my boyfriend. I met his parents last week, and they hated me. They said we can't- we can't-"

Luo Xianxian dissolved into fresh tears. Chu Wanning heard muffled snatches of speech – something about her father and her boyfriend's mother and a perfume formula.

Oh, he so *hated* to be touched, but… But he hated to see her crying like this even more. Completely alone. Someone weeping alone – it was something that he could never ignore. He felt it like a physical pain in his heart.

He reached out and gingerly patted her shoulder. "Is this why you got 40% on Wednesday, do you think?"

She nodded. "It was the day after the dinner – his brothers were so- so- they said that I was a gold-digger, my father was a liar- he's *not*-"

"I'm sure he's not. You don't need to defend him to me. I believe you." To his horror, this redoubled her sobs, and Chu Wanning didn't know what he'd said wrong. "*Xu xu*, it's all right…"

"I can- I know you paused my time, but I can go in…" she said, face twisting horribly.

“Well. I think you have more than enough going on at the moment, Miss Luo. If you’d like, I can fetch you a glass of water, and then you can go back in and finish the test. However, if you’d prefer, we can leave this one until the end of term. You’ll still have to pass it, but we won’t break up for the New Year until the end of January. We can meet again in just after the beginning of the month, we can have a revision session or two, and you can retake the test when things are hopefully clearer.”

“Can… can we do that? I’m just so tired, I can’t sleep…”

“That’s more important. Thank you for telling me. I can’t help if I don’t know. I’ll write off this test, it never happened, and we’ll reconvene in January.” He turned the next sentence over in his head, worrying about whether it was too personal, whether he was being inappropriate. “I hope things work out. With your… And if they don’t, that you’re all right.”

He cringed. Of course she wouldn’t be – and commenting on a student’s personal relationship? Idiot!

Luo Xianxian wasn’t staring at him in horrified shock, though. “Thank you – that’s so kind, Chu-*laoshi*. And I- I- I can e-mail you, about the revision session…?”

“Of course,” said Chu Wanning, relieved beyond words. Revision sessions, those he was comfortable with.

“I’ve got snot all over your handkerchief…”

He managed a smile. “That’s what they’re for. I can wash it.”

“I’ll wash it, I can return it to you. You’ve already- already-“

“Ah, it’s all right,” he replied, hoping to stave off another bout of tears. “You just look after yourself.”

They went back into the room to allow Luo Xianxian to gather her things. She handed the paper in to Chu Wanning, who drew a line through it to reassure her that it wouldn't be counted.

The rest of the test passed without incident until the papers had all been handed in and the students were filing out.

Chu Wanning didn't hear the door close behind the final student; he looked up to see Mo Ran holding it open. Which meant that both heard one of the departing test-takers say to his friend, "Did you see him kick that girl out because she was crying?"

"What an asshole…"

Mo Ran looked embarrassed; he looked back at Chu Wanning in horror.

He felt his thin face redden. Pretending he hadn't heard was impossible. "Her mind was clearly on other matters," he snapped, gathering up his papers and his mug. "Why are you here?"

"I thought we could go to Mengpo Canteen for lunch."

Chu Wanning looked at him with a frown. "What? With me?"

Mo Ran grinned. "Sure."

"Why?"

"I mean… because I'm hungry, and it's lunchtime."

“I mean, is Xue Meng busy?” Chu Wanning quickly shoved the mug into his messenger bag. “Are you incapable of eating on your own?”

Idiot! Stupid – what a stupid thing to say! Even without Shi Mingjing and Xue Meng, Mo Ran probably had scores of people falling over themselves to sit with him. The women of the university were probably forming queues. Just because Chu Wanning never sat with anyone, it didn’t mean Mo Ran was similarly lonely and limited in his options of dining companions.

“Not incapable, but it just tastes better with company.” Mo Ran was still smiling at him. “Please?”

The tips of his ears burnt. Mo Ran was just trying to get in his good books. That was all. He wanted to reassure himself that Chu Wanning did not hold his behaviour last week against him.

“Fine,” he said as casually as he could.

The air was biting cold. Chu Wanning was wearing a white puffer-jacket, but he’d have to dig out his hat and gloves for the rest of the week. He couldn’t understand how Mo Ran was sauntering around in just a leather jacket.

It was the first reason to regret his acquiescence. The second was how busy Mengpo Canteen was, and how loud. He rarely ate there – the four-metre radius that formed around him was humiliating – except when he was with Xue Zhengyong, who brought him to the teachers' table.

Did he queue? There were so many serving stations – which one should he lead them to?

“I’ll queue,” Mo Ran offered. “Can you grab that table for us? What do you fancy – beef? Pork? Tofu?”

“Tofu.”

Chu Wanning brought out his telephone while he waited for Mo Ran and went through his e-mails. A few new addresses to block, the usual accusations that he was an unpatriotic demonic dog traitor working for Japan, America- Germany? That one was new. Did Germany even have nuclear weapons?

He made a search. Apparently it did not, but it hosted nuclear weapons for America. That would explain the connection; he was doing America’s work just like Germany was. He hummed in comprehension and blocked the address.

The accusations of treachery and corruption no longer engendered any distress, so many months after the Supreme Peoples’ Court’s final ruling. More difficult to be blasé about were the threats, especially from people who claimed to be with the military or the police – *be careful when you go out, everyone in my divison hates you, we piss on your picture, we’ll do it in person soon.*

There was also one from someone who claimed to have served on a 09-IV submarine. It was short and to the point: Chu Wanning was a traitor, and would be executed as a traitor. He marked that one as *Important*.

He needed to go through his physical post soon as well. He’d let it build up, but sorting, marking and archiving it all was such a chore.

One more caught his eye. An accusation that frequently popped up was that he wasn’t even really Chinese, but this e-mail had then gone further.

Even your own parents threw you away. Even they were disgusted by you. Bad blood will out.

It was just some hateful person with no life and too much time on their hands, he told himself. His background information was freely available online, thanks to Huaizui propelling him into the limelight at such a young age. Someone adopts an orphan who turns out to be a polymathic genius, then tries to kill him a decade later? Obviously it had made the

national news, and it had all been raked up again throughout the court cases. Another thing to thank Huaizui for.

"Getting impatient?" Mo Ran suddenly broke through his thoughts, and he realised he'd been nervously tapping his fingers on the table.

"Hm? Oh, no," he said, and put his hands under the table.

Mo Ran put down two bowls.

Oh, no.

Mo Ran had bought them chewy noodles – beef on his own, and tofu on Chu Wanning's, along with chunks of white spring onion and cabbage and egg floss.

It all floated in a garlic water broth that was an angry shade of red. Globules of violently orange chili oil drifted amidst the prickly ash peppercorns, entwined sinuously around the noodles, teasingly coated the tofu.

Of course Mo Ran liked spicy food. Of course he expected everyone else to love it as well. They were in Sichuan, after all. But Chu Wanning was absolutely and physically incapable of eating it.

Mo Ran was already happily slurping. Chu Wanning picked up his chopsticks with the air of a man climbing the gallows.

The first piece of tofu was deceptive. For a second, Chu Wanning thought that perhaps his tolerance had improved, or at least that the dish wasn't so bad.

Then it hit: a spreading wave of excruciation. His mouth was on fire.

He nearly spat the piece out. Instead he swallowed without chewing it properly – anything to get the *thing* away from his abused taste buds – which then caused a horrible kind of tickling agony in the back of his throat.

"Are you all right?" Mo Ran asked over the sound of his coughing.

"Fine!" Chu Wanning gasped. To prove it, he ate another blistering bite. Chewed. Swallowed. And another.

He had endured pain before. He could endure this. This was his Battle of Gaixia.

He ate another bite. His nose was running. His scalp with prickling with sweat, and even his sweat felt scalding.

This wasn't Gaixia. This was the battle of Banquan, only this time, the Flame Emperor was going to win.

His eyes were streaming. Between bouts of blinking away tears, he saw that Mo Ran had fetched a jug of water; Chu Wanning grabbed it and managed to pour it mostly into his cup.

"Not a spice fan?"

"Fine," Chu Wanning breathed, not quite hearing the question. It was difficult to save face when that face was bright-red, sweat-sheened, and streaked with tears. "Just- just went down the wrong way."

His mouth was numb. Even his lips felt tingling and inflamed now, as though he'd been punched in the mouth.

Mo Ran swam in front of him, an astonished look on his face. Chu Wanning drank another cup of water without taking a breath, but it was just *moving* the chili oil, just spreading it further. His tongue had to be swollen; it was so traumatised he suddenly worried that he wouldn't be able to give his afternoon lecture.

"I can buy something else…?"

Of course. Mo Ran had bought this meal. He saw how quickly Mo Ran ate, as though someone was about to steal his food from him, and so Chu Wanning *knew* how callous it would be to waste food in front of him. Especially when he had bought it for him.

He reached for his handkerchief, then remembered too late that he had given it to Luo Xianxian.

His hand shaking as though he was running a fever, he reached out again with his chopsticks, only for Mo Ran to pull the bowl away from him, out of reach.

"What are you *doing*?"

"You bought it," Chu Wanning croaked. The chopsticks clattered, and he poured another glass of water, using both hands.

"*So?*"

"Rude."

"So you'll choke to death to be polite?! It was seven yuan. It's fine. Look, I'll finish it! I'm still hungry. I- I didn't want to look greedy, buying two bowls, eh? I wanted two bowls. Give me the rest."

"No."

Mo Ran spat in Chu Wanning’s noodles.

Chu Wanning’s jaw dropped.

Mo Ran raised an eyebrow back at him. “Still want it back?”

“What are you- *shameless*!”

Mo Ran grinned at him.

“I-“ Chu Wanning furiously wiped his tears away with the back of his hand, incoherent with shock. He stalked away. He stopped. Then he turned on his heel, and stalked back. “Thank you for the meal.”

Mo Ran stared at him for a moment, as though he couldn't quite believe his eyes. Then he burst into peals of laughter, and even through the agony and the humiliation and the disgust, just for a moment, the sound eased Chu Wanning's disaster of a heart.

Chapter 9: Street Concerts

Chapter Notes

> A bit of a gentle chapter, this one, but I hope you like it! I always find timeskips a bit tricky. But it's my birthday week, so please, the very best presents I could receive are any comments you might be able to leave! XD As ever, thank you so much for reading, and I hope you're enjoying the story!

When Mo Ran was very young, his mother used to busk to raise enough money for them to eat. Hidden close by in an alleyway behind her, Mo Ran would sit, and for lack of anything else to do, he tamed the stray cats that lived in the bins.

The trick to taming a cat, he had learnt, was presence. A dog could be bought quite easily with food, but even if bribed with a morsel, a cat would run away soon enough. But if you sat, for hours and days, eventually the cat would warm to you. It would learn that you were safe (especially if the occasional bribe was still given), and would finally let you stroke it, or fall asleep in your lap.

Chu Wanning was like one of those stray cats, hissing and clawing and fleeing. Before he could seduce him, Mo Ran would have to tame him.

Presence, and routine. He'd need to make up for the disaster with the spice; he'd had a vague inkling that Chu Wanning hadn't liked spicy food, but the performance in the canteen had been beyond his wildest dreams. He'd laughed himself sick all evening, remembering it.

And then he'd dreamt of Chu Wanning's face, pink with pain, sheened with sweat, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. Mo Ran had been fucking him with a need so powerful, so overwhelming, that he'd woken up with sticky sheets, like he was a teenager again.

It turned out he was an even sicker fucker than even he'd realised.

So, definitely no spice.

The day after the lunch disaster, he came into the lab, and made straight for Chu Wanning's office. When he was invited in – "Door open, please" – he didn't stand behind the desk, but instead sat down in the chair he'd taken the day before, and began to talk. Talking about his abstract, then a conference he was thinking about applying for, and then just how annoying someone had been in the gym before.

Chu Wanning stared at him in bemused silence.

"And he didn't even put the weights away!" Mo Ran said, finishing his sentence with a croak. Polite Chu Wanning might be, but he apparently had absolutely zero ability to pick up on social cues. "Sorry, could I have a…?"

Chu Wanning stood up. "Of course," he said, as though he was the one being rude. "Coffee again?"

"Please." Mo Ran beamed at him as Chu Wanning put out two mugs, and then carried on with whatever nonsense he'd been chatting about.

Chu Wanning gingerly sat down opposite him. He didn't say a word until Mo Ran asked him outright about a conference in Xian, when he answered in a monotone. He looked nothing if not… confused. His face was open, brows narrowed in a gentle frown; it made him look much younger, all of a sudden.

More difficult than the coffee was arranging lunch again. Chu Wanning's face shuttered closed, and he put on a look of haughty disdain. Mo Ran realised with a thrill that it was because he was embarrassed about his reaction to the spice. How thin was this man's face?!

But more than that… There was the satisfaction of working out a code. A puzzle. Chu Wanning liked proper scientific rigour, so, a hypothesis: was this Chu Wanning's defence against humiliation? Mo Ran would have to keep an eye out for this expression of hauteur in the future.

“I have other plans.”

“Chu-*laoshi*, now who’s lying?” Mo Ran said, and laughed at the look of fury Chu Wanning gave him. “Sorry, sorry! But I promise, nothing spicy today. Please.”

“I said no.”

“But it’s your turn to pay! Just one more lunch, to make us even.”

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes even more. “… fine.”

At lunchtime, Mo Ran made a mental note of what Chu Wanning chose: a chicken and chestnut stir-fry.

“Where are you from, Chu-*laoshi*?”

“Hangzhou.” Chu Wanning handed over a far spicier beef dish to Mo Ran. “But I spent most of my childhood in Henan.”

Mo Ran nodded to himself. “That makes sense. Zhejiang and Henan cooking use much less spice than Sichuan. That explains why you can’t eat it.”

“I can eat it.”

Mo Ran grinned. “I mean, why you don’t prefer it.”

“Mn.”

The first week was agony. Chu Wanning had to be cajoled and manipulated and pushed at every turn. But by the third week, it was their new routine: tea and coffee first thing in the morning, and lunchtime in Mengpo Canteen.

Xue Meng joined them about half the time. There had been some strange tension between him and Chu Wanning, but Mo Ran chalked it down to Xue Meng's weird case of hero worship, and it faded after a few days. His presence made Chu Wanning's anti-social silences much easier to endure, even if he'd first been furious that Mo Ran had invited his supervisor into their breaks.

Xue Meng was spending more and more time in the robotics lab, training for the International Robotics Championship he would be attending after the New Year. He was determined to win first place with his Longcheng, and if he progressed even as far as the national rounds he'd be travelling for several weeks.

After their first lunch, however, as soon as they were clear of Mengpo Canteen, Xue Meng punched him in the shoulder.

"Ow! Fuck, what was that for?"

"Why the hell are you inviting *him* to lunch?" Xue Meng hissed. He looked around to check that Chu Wanning wasn't in earshot. "What are you playing at?"

"I'm not playing at anything!" Mo Ran said, rubbing his shoulder. "I thought you'd be overjoyed at more time with the most honoured of all the world-honoured Saint-Professor Chu Wanning."

"You-!" Xue Meng pulled him to one side. "You hate him! Why are you doing this?"

"I don't hate him."

“You’re such a fucking liar. For the last year you’ve been going on and on about what a bastard he is, and now suddenly you want to be his friend?”

“Yeah,” Mo Ran said simply. “I was being a dick. I realised he’s actually helped me out, and…” And he realised that this was the perfect opportunity to begin planting the seeds in Xue Meng’s mind. Chu Wanning, the predator. “And since Shi Mei left, he’s been really nice to me. He started inviting me in for coffee in the mornings, so I thought the least I could do was invite him to join us for lunch. To be honest I didn’t expect him to take me up on it, but he seems to want to hang around more.”

Xue Meng was looking at him with suspicion. “At least you’ve realised now how much he’s done for you. You’re such a dog. He pats your head once and you just roll over.”

“Better than sniffing his arse whenever you can,” Mo Ran said, and easily batted away Xue Meng’s next punch. “Why are you pissed off about it?”

Mo Ran knew exactly why; he just enjoyed seeing his stuck-up cousin flush with embarrassment. Xue Meng would sing Chu Wanning’s praises to anyone who asked, but he was too awestruck, too afraid of his supervisor’s reputation and expectations. Xue Meng was unused to the presence to anyone to whom he did not feel innately superior, and so Chu Wanning’s company was a burden to him. He felt that he had to be on his best behaviour, and that was something that didn’t come easily to him.

“I’m not! Just… Maybe I want a break at lunchtime too, okay?”

“You’re barely here,” Mo Ran said. “You spend every day lubing up Longcheng. Anyway, it’s our routine now, so deal with it.”

It might have been the beginnings of a routine, but for Mo Ran it was hard fucking work. More often than not, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were alone in their meals, and Mo Ran was soon going to run out of things to talk about.

Chu Wanning didn’t watch films. He didn’t watch television. He didn’t go to the gym, or the cinema, or bars, or restaurants. He apparently had no friends. He didn’t enjoy gossip, whether

about celebrities or about people they knew. Mo Ran even attempted to talk about *politics* one time, and while that had finally engendered some conversation, it was venomous. He was going to have to start paying attention to the news if he wanted to keep up with Chu Wanning on the subject.

Until, finally, in his desperation he found a footing.

"Mm, yes, I like music," Chu Wanning said. It was the day after Christmas, and the canteen had been half-heartedly decorated with lights and some baubles for any Christians or international students who were attending Sisheng.

"Yeah?" Mo Ran wasn't particularly knowledgeable – in his experience, music was a side-dish to keep time to while exercising – but he'd be damned before he started reading books. "What kind?"

"Classical."

Fuck. Right. Of course. Pretentious bastard. "Western or Chinese?"

"Both, but I prefer Chinese."

"Just listening, or do you play?"

"I play. The guqin."

"Is that like the… stringed one?" Mo Ran made a show of playing the table.

Chu Wanning didn't smile. "Mn."

It was like getting blood from a stone. “I bet when you say you ‘play an instrument’ you mean that you’re a concert soloist.”

Chu Wanning delicately picked a cashew out of his rice. “No. Not for years. I stopped when I started my doctorate.”

Of course. Of *course*. Mo Ran felt sick to his stomach. He begged off early, and searched online when he was home (his initial search just brought up the thousands of results on the barrier court case, so he then specified it by 'guqin' as well). He found a recording: a video of eleven-year-old Chu Wanning performing the guqin in his own concert at the NCPA.

Mo Ran couldn’t believe it was him at first. His head was shaved, hair so short he was almost bald, and he was wearing a white silk shirt with a high collar and straight pankou knots. But then there was a close-up, and Mo Ran could suddenly see the adult in the child. He wore the same haughty little sneer throughout, even during his bows, and barely deigned to even look at the audience.

Eleven years old. Mo Ran would have been six. While he was freezing, his mother busking on the streets, Chu Wanning had been giving his own concert at the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing.

He felt so angry he was surprised his eyes weren’t bleeding. They prickled with heat, and his throat was raw.

He was going to destroy him, Mo Ran reminded himself. They might have been worlds apart eighteen years ago, but they would be worlds apart eighteen months from now as well. The whole world was going to know what a piece of shit Chu Wanning really was.

*

Mo Ran walked through the streets of Wuchang on the 1st of January. He had gone out with Xue Meng and his frenemies the Mei Hanxues, visiting from Kunlan, for a night on the town to ring in the New Year. Shi Mei had begged off, citing his thesis. Mo Ran didn’t blame him.

The last thing he'd want if he were Shi Mei would be to have to listen to Xue Meng verbally suck Chu Wanning's cock off once he'd had his second drink.

The early hours of the morning had been beginning to blur. Mo Ran had carried Xue Meng back home, depositing him in bed while the elder Mei Hanxue did the same for his brother, and was now working his way back to his flat. He'd considered crashing in his bedroom at the Xues, but he just knew he was going to be hungover by the afternoon, and he couldn't bear the thought of Xue Zhengyong's booming voice or sitting through a family dinner with the Meis.

The sun had risen, and the dawnlight on the freshly-fallen mountain snow really did make the whole world look clean and new. Gold and pink light fell on white so bright it looked blue to Mo Ran's exhausted, clouded eyes. The air was cold and fresh in his lungs after the night of alcohol and cigarette smoke and perfume, and he felt that he could finally *breathe*. Finally…

If only he could always feel like this. This stolen moment of peace. He hadn't realised just how tense his shoulders were until he inhaled and exhaled the freezing air again.

A slow, graceful movement caught his eye. He looked across the People's Park, and smiled at the sight of the aunties doing their morning tai chi. They had probably been in bed by nine, with no thoughts of watching the fireworks in Shanghai or Beijing on the television. It did his heart good to see them, for some reason. He wished them well.

Wait.

Was that-?

Mo Ran felt like he'd been shot with a sobriety sniper rifle. The tallest auntie, at the back, wasn't a fucking auntie at all. Before he knew it he was trotting forward, unthinking, just *needing* to get a closer look.

Under the fluorescent lights in the lab or the lecture theatre or the canteen Chu Wanning looked wan and washed out. But now the dawn light reflected up off the snow and painted him in ethereal colours. The cold brought pink to his cheeks and his ears, and the snowlight

made his skin glow. The early morning light shone blindingly on his ink-black hair, ponytail swaying gently as he moved. He looked like an angel.

He was beautiful. Beautiful beyond words, beyond breath; Mo Ran exhaled to calm the sudden pain in his chest.

Chu Wanning was wearing a silly white puffer vest over his tai chi clothes. He had *tai chi clothes*. He was moving through the forms with perfect grace, perfect efficiency of movement.

All Mo Ran could do was watch.

His feet went numb. He couldn't feel his fingers. He didn't care.

Chu Wanning went to talk to the women (mostly women; there were a couple of old men, one clearly dragged along by his wife) after they finished. Mo Ran had never seen him so relaxed in a conversation; it was obvious that he knew them all. He didn't laugh, but Mo Ran thought that he might keel over dead from shock when he saw a flash of white teeth.

Who knew that Chu Wanning could smile? A proper smile, rather than a smirk?

Who knew that it lit up his face like a star?

Eventually Chu Wanning broke away. He huffed on his hands before slipping his gloves on them, and Mo Ran wanted those fingers in his mouth, he wanted to suck them, he wanted to warm Chu Wanning until he went from pink with cold to pink with pleasure without pause.

Then Chu Wanning saw Mo Ran, staring straight at him like an idiot. His eyes were comically wide, and darted, looking for an escape route.

It was so ludicrous that his own laughter shocked Mo Ran out of his daze. He jogged across the snow-covered grass, footsteps crisping loudly. “Happy New Year, Chu-*laoshi*!”

“Mo Ran.” Resigned to his fate, Chu Wanning waved awkwardly. “No need to- ah…”

He was looking with regret at the immaculate span of white, now marred by Mo Ran’s prints.

“Sorry,” Mo Ran said, and grinned. His breath hung like smoke between them. “Bit of tai chi to round out the partying, eh?”

“Very funny.”

“I am. You looked great. Very… elegant.” Chu Wanning’s typical signs of anger: the raised chin, the narrowed eyes, the wrinkled nose. Mo Ran held up his hands. “I mean it! Very virtuous way to bring in the new year.”

“In comparison to some ways, perhaps,” Chu Wanning said icily, his voice colder than the air. He looked Mo Ran up and down, and then shocked Mo Ran’s ghost right out of his body. “Do you want a coffee?”

“A…?” What the hell? “I don’t look that bad, do I?”

“Mn.”

Mo Ran’s grin twisted. “Right. I’m fine, thanks. I didn’t sleep, so coffee will just postpone the inevitable. Better to sleep. Want to be fresh and rested by the time we're back in the lab.”

“Right. Yes.” Chu Wanning’s gaze snapped away from him, and he stared pointedly away. “I have to get home as well.”

“Yeah. It’s freezing.”

“Mn.” Chu Wanning’s eyes snapped back to his, just for a second, and there was some emotion there that Mo Ran couldn’t name. Then it was gone, and Chu Wanning was looking away again. “Go home, then.”

“Sure…” Mo Ran watched as Chu Wanning went back to talk to the women instead, and wondered what the fuck had just happened.

Chapter 10: Refusing to Bloom Casually

Chapter Notes

> The chapter title comes from a translation of the Jin Dynasty's (1115 – 1234) Yuan Haowen's poem about haitang blossoms! There's a warning in this chapter for threatening, nationalist language, including examples of brief mentions of rape, suicide, and violence as well as racist and homophobic language.
>
> Thank you so much for reading, I hope you're enjoying the fic!

The next day, Mo Ran made his usual beeline for Chu Wanning's office when he entered the lab. He looked through the window, and saw that he wasn't at his desk, though the lights were on. Then he looked down.

Chu Wanning was sitting cross-legged on the floor, and every available inch of floor space around him was covered in papers, envelopes, polythene pockets, and rolls of stickers. He looked up when Mo Ran knocked and opened the door. "Not today, I'm afraid," he said with cold venom in his voice. "You'll actually have to buy your coffee for once."

Mo Ran ignored him and stepped inside, careful not to disturb the chaos further. "What's this?"

"Post. Personal post."

"This is all your personal post?"

"This is everything from November and December. I let it get on top of me," Chu Wanning said with a rare sigh. "I'm going to be here for another couple of hours, Mo Ran, so if you could just-"

But Mo Ran had seen something. In one of the polythene pockets, with some coloured stickers in the corner, was an opened envelope, and a piece of paper with an image printed on it. An image of Chu Wanning's university website headshot manipulated onto a naked, bloody corpse.

Mo Ran's blood ran cold. His scalp prickled. He blinked and looked at the picture again, almost expecting it to change. Amid the riot of papers that swirled around him like a mandala, Chu Wanning looked small and tired.

"Is this… Is this your hate mail?"

Chu Wanning gave a one-shouldered shrug. "The physical ones from the last couple of months. It ebbs and flows. There was an article out about a month ago, and that always triggers a new deluge. It's easier to archive the e-mails, but this usually takes a while."

"But why are you… Chu-*laoshi*, why are you filing them?" Were they trophies of some kind? Mo Ran didn't think so, looking at Chu Wanning's pale face.

"My lawyer advised me to keep them all. In case they were ever needed for an asylum application or a murder investigation."

He said it so blandly, in his usual cold monotone. As though it was one boring piece of legal advice among many.

Chu Wanning wasn't *human*, Mo Ran thought, with an edge of anger that felt almost hysterical. No human being could be so icy and dispassionate about such a thing.

He crouched down to look at another polythene packet, peering at the bold handwriting of the letter.

I'd love to run into you in a dark alleyway. There will be no escape. I'm going to knock your teeth out so you can suck my cock better. You are not a human being. What kind of object are

you?

The air was sucked from his lungs. He picked up the packet, evoking a noise of protest from Chu Wanning, which he ignored.

He was feeling rage unlike anything he had known before. It was incandescent, white-hot, and it was sick and wild with jealousy. Chu Wanning was *his*! His territory, his *property*. Only he could destroy him! Only he was allowed to bring him down – who was this animal? This sick, perverted motherfucker? Mo Ran was going to hunt him down and kill him!

He looked down, and Chu Wanning was staring right up at him. Their respective positions and the words on the page swam together in a nauseating, mind-blowing conjunction of loathing and fury and arousal.

Chu Wanning's face was… soft. His lips had parted, just a little, and his eyes were…

"Don't read them, Mo Ran," he said softly. "A lot of them are dirty."

Dirty! *Dirty*! That wasn't the word that had leapt to Mo Ran's mind, but fuck him if Chu Wanning wasn't right. The word wasn't enough, it was nowhere near enough! It felt strangely innocent, for Chu Wanning to call such a hateful piece of writing *dirty*.

He swallowed painfully past the lump in his throat, trying to force the image of Chu Wanning grabbed in some disgusting alleyway by some disgusting man out of his head.

And that final line… He'd thought that same thing, those same words, just seconds ago. Was he… No, he *knew* things about Chu Wanning that this freak didn't, so it was different… It was.

But his gut didn't seem to think so. He could feel the acidic sting of bile in the back of his throat.

He tried to distract himself by looking at another letter.

The next time you come to Chengdu, I'll be waiting, fascist. You give the whole province a bad name. Go back to where you came from, so you don't stain us with your monstrous audacity or your soldier-killing sabotage any longer. Better yet, get the fuck out of China altogether. Maybe your masters will let you in. Or maybe they'll shoot you.

He needed a coffee. He needed a *drink*.

"Show me what to do," he said without thinking.

"What?"

"It'll be quicker with two of us. Or if you like, I can do it for you. You shouldn't have to read this shit."

Chu Wanning ducked his head down. Looming as he was over him, Mo Ran suddenly noticed with a lightning strike of electricity down his spine that the tops of his ears were bright pink. "I'm used to it."

"You shouldn't be," Mo Ran said, and Chu Wanning gripped his hands in fists. He was inhaling, slowly, and he reminded Mo Ran of nothing more than a cat arching its back in angry fright.

"Well?" he suddenly snapped. "Are you going to sit down or not?"

"I'm sitting, I'm sitting!" Mo Ran said, toeing a packet away and joining Chu Wanning on the floor.

He reached out to pick up a new envelope, and Chu Wanning slapped his hand with cat-like speed.

"Ow! I thought you said I could help?"

"Gloves," Chu Wanning said, and gestured to a box of latex gloves. "Use the letter opener, and try not to touch the letter with your bare hands. So, let's look at this one, for example…"

He slit open the envelope with practiced efficiency, and unfolded the letter.

You're a reactionary traitorous bitch! I'm going to slit your throat and fuck you while you bleed out! Damn you to hell!

He held it out for Mo Ran to read, for rather longer than he needed. Chu Wanning didn't have much confidence in his literacy, obviously.

"Both then go into the polythene pocket, with a label saying the month and year it was received. If they contain any threats, any mention of death or violence, like this one, they get a red sticker. Blue is for anything that mentions the police. Green for military. Yellow for government and Party. The big red stickers are for anything important."

Mo Ran had the horrifying feeling of a pit opening beneath his feet. "What's 'important'?"

"I trust your judgement," Chu Wanning said simply, not realising how he'd just rocked the foundations of Mo Ran's existence. "Most of it's nonsense. It anything seems credible, if they know things, if they really do seem to be from the police or the military. If they sign their names. If they do, write it on a sticker, put it under the date, but they're rare. Anything that mentions Xue Zhengyong or... or Dr Rong Yan."

"Who's that?"

“She was my supervisor for my doctorate. My first one. Anything that goes to my flat is obviously important, because it means they have access to database records. The most important thing is to never, ever open a parcel. Do you understand?”

“Sure,” Mo Ran said.

“No, Mo Ran, look at me.” Chu Wanning didn’t like eye contact, especially not eye contact as intense and direct as this, but he made it now. His eyes were dark and stern. “Do not open any parcels addressed to me. Ever. If it’s equipment or supplies, it should be addressed to the lab; if it’s addressed to me personally, leave it for me to open.”

“I understand.”

“Right.” Chu Wanning looked back down at the mess of letters and packets. “Are you sure about this?”

“’Course. It won’t take long.” Mo Ran smiled. “I’ve taken up hundreds of hours of your time over the years. So. Let me help.”

Again, Chu Wanning looked away. He opened the next piece of post, but his eyes weren’t moving, and his ears were still red.

Mo Ran opened a new envelope.

Gay piece of shit. I hope your whole family dies. Clearly you hate China. Get the fuck out of our country.

‘I hope your whole family dies’ – was that violent? It wasn’t a threat, technically… But Chu Wanning had said that anything mentioning death should get a red sticker, so on it went.

Fuck your mother, you half-breed bastard. Oh wait, you don't have one. Do us all a favour, put yourself out of your misery and hang yourself.

When he and Shi Mei accused Chu Wanning, Mo Ran realised, these letter-writers were going to receive a hell of a lot of ammunition. This was what they wrote to him based only on the perceived barrier sabotage.

What would they escalate to when they knew he was a predator as well?

Mo Ran's guilt was short-lived. By the end of the week, Chu Wanning was off work with a bad cold (Ha! That's what you got for seeing in the New Year with tai chi in the snow, instead of the proper way: being so drunk that you miss the countdown because you're getting head from a stranger in the men's toilets).

He regularly caught them all the way through the winter; he'd alert them by e-mail, giving his lecture via a video link if he was able to, and making Xue Meng cover if he wasn't. Mo Ran watched him deliver his lecture on the design of advanced tidal system turbine arrays with a stuffed nose and a painful-sounding cough, and thought that he really seemed quite… pitiful.

He'd just finished watching the lecture from his workspace (Xue Meng had drawn the audio-visual short straw) when a stranger came into the XS lab. She was a slight, pretty girl with her hair in bunches. Mo Ran didn't recognise her from any of the Master's level classes.

"I'm sorry, I'm looking for Chu-*laoshi*?"

"He's not in today," Mo Ran said. "Off sick."

"Oh, no! Poor thing."

Mo Ran raised his eyebrow. "It's a good thing he's not in, because if he heard you saying that he'd take a whip to you."

“Professor Chu? No!” said the girl. “He’s so kind!”

Mo Ran raised the other eyebrow. “We mean the same man, right? Chu Wanning?”

“Yes, of course. He’s the kindest professor in the university. I used to be scared of him, then realised he was just awkward. He’s so sweet.” The girl put a folded handkerchief on Mo Ran’s desk. “Could you give this to him? He lent it to me when I was crying; please tell him that I’ve washed it and ironed it, of course. He said we could do a revision class before my resit, so I’ll send him an e-mail… Could you just let him know I came by? I'm Luo Xianxian.”

“I will, sure thing." She was a sweet girl, bubbly and smiley. Mo Ran grimaced a smile at her. "Look, just… Just be careful, eh?”

“Why?” Luo Xianxian blinked at him.

He should warn her. He’d been assuming Chu Wanning was gay, but maybe he wasn’t – maybe any student would do. Maybe it was the position of power that got him going, the knowledge that the student would find it difficult to say no to him. Shi Mei and Luo Xianxian both looked sweet and innocent and pretty – maybe that was it? If so, it spelt doom for Mo Ran's plan.

Why else would he be so kind to this girl? Even to lend her his handkerchief – he looked down, and it was embroidered with a pink and red flower – his silk, embroidered handkerchief! Chu Wanning was a notorious germaphobe, and he disliked people touching his things nearly as much as he disliked them touching himself.

But… he hadn’t actually done anything to this girl, had he? Not yet. And… And.

And.

His actual mission was to find another victim of Chu Wanning – to find one, or create one of himself. This girl wasn't yet a victim. If he warned her off, Chu Wanning might grow suspicious.

No. He would keep a close eye on the situation for the moment, and see how it developed.

The end justified the means. Right?

He grinned at Luo Xianxian. "He's just *such* a hardass. I had more revision classes with him than I can count, I wouldn't consider them much of a kindness!"

Luo Xianxian laughed. "I'd still rather have one than go into the resit without! I've had so much going on, I feel so unprepared, I've forgotten everything."

"Ah, you'll be fine! Just do your best. He'll always let you retake again if you don't do well enough."

"Yeah, I know. He really is so kind. You're so lucky, to be in his lab. Oh! I also have…" She took out a tiny bottle, holding about five millilitres of oil. "My dad's a perfumer. When I told him how nice Chu-*laoshi* had been, he made this for him. It's a perfume oil based on apple wood – because of the xifu haitang blossom on the handkerchief. Could you give this to him as well?"

"Haitang blossom?" Mo Ran unfolded the handkerchief. "I thought it was a cherry blossom…"

"No, my dad knows all about trees. It's definitely haitang. Five petals, see? Yes, he said that crabapples usually aren't eaten because they're so sour and woody. But the wood smells especially lovely and burns hot for a long, long time, and the blossoms are beautiful even if they don't have a scent. That's why they're a symbol of modesty, because they open late, and hide their scent."

She sighed dreamily. Mo Ran nearly laughed out loud. No one ate crabapples because they were sour and wooden – a perfect description of Chu Wanning.

“He normally doesn’t accept presents from students,” he said, “but I’ll pass this on to him. That’s very thoughtful.”

“It’s the least I could do! And it’s only a tiny bottle. Don't say it's a gift, if he won't accept it, say it's a free sample.”

“Clever. That might work.”

“It’d be true. Dad said he might do a proper line, the oil came out very well. And haitang flowers are so romantic! The flower of heartbreak… I would never have expected Professor Chu to have a handkerchief like this. I wonder if he’s in love.” Mo Ran choked, and Luo Xianxian playfully swatted his shoulder. “He might be! I have to go, but thank you for passing it on to him. I’ll e-mail him now!”

Mo Ran watched helplessly as she went. He unscrewed the bottle; the scent that escaped was a beautiful mix of woods and florals.

Chu Wanning, in love? Some people really were delusional.

Chapter 11: Fight Poison with Poison

Chapter Notes

> I received so many spam comments on the last chapter, which was so depressing and disheartening, so double and triple thanks to all the human beings who commented instead! 😍💖

Chu Wanning had mixed feelings about being ill. There were a lot of things he hated about it, obviously. He hated the shivers, the gross indignity of a runny nose or coughing up phlegm. He hated the chills that racked him. He hated the pounding headache and the weak limbs.

He *really* hated the sweating, the uncleanliness of it, the way he was sure it must be incredibly obvious to anyone he video-messaged.

He hated anyone knowing he was ill, anyone being in the least bit aware that he was a human being who could be weak and feel pain. If people didn't know, then he didn't have to worry about the fact that they didn't care. But if people were to know and *still* not care… Chu Wanning thought that that might be the most pathetic, lonely thing in the world.

He was ill, and he had no one to care for him. It made him feel so heart-achingly forlorn, and his own self-pity then made him feel disgusted. No wonder he had no one. His inside was just as unlikable and ugly as his outside was.

The one thing he liked about being ill, however, was that for once, he had an excuse to rest. His only use to the world was as a tool, and a tool was required to be available at all times. It was only of use when it was being used. But if the tool was being mended, then it wasn't useless, was it? It wasn't the tool's fault if it was broken, at least, as long as it wasn't broken too often...

But if he *couldn't* work then he didn't *have* to work. He could crawl under his duvet, with the black-out blinds down and the room silent. For once, the too-bright, too-loud world could go on without him, and in the still darkness he could find some measure of peace.

Usually. He would be able to tomorrow, when the chills passed. Right now, there was no restful silence, but the sound of his own teeth chattering, his own breath shuddering out. He wanted nothing more than to run a scalding bath, but the bathroom was so far away. He hadn't eaten, limbs too weak to go to the shop to buy anything, but he wouldn't have had the energy to eat it anyway, let alone to cook it.

No… He would soldier through the chills, but at least he was safe in the quiet and the darkness. No one to worry about who might be laughing at him or whispering about him.

No Mo Ran to worry about…

Mo Ran, who had sat on the floor with him for an hour as they sorted through the most disgusting, filthy letters. Chu Wanning had occasionally dared to glance his way, and the anger on Mo Ran's face as he'd read threat after threat had engendered a warm glow in his heart. He could count the number of people who had worn that expression for him on one hand: Rong Yan, his lawyer, Hua Binan, Xue Zhengyong, and now Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning rolled over in bed and buried his ridiculous face into his pillow; even alone in a darkened, locked room, smiling at the thought of Mo Ran being angry on his behalf was just *too* vulnerable, *too* embarrassing.

Chu Wanning was not so delusional as to think that Mo Ran would ever return his feelings. He prayed that Mo Ran would never even *suspect* them: they were wrong, shameful, humiliating, depraved. But… they'd started to become friendly, hadn't they? He knew that Mo Ran just liked company, disliked eating alone now that Shi Mei was in exile, but he could have made friends with anyone. Instead, he was seeking out Chu Wanning's company. And Chu Wanning's awkward silences and monotonous, droning, didactic attempts at conversation hadn't chased him away yet.

Yet. It was only a matter of time, before Chu Wanning became too frustrated by painful life in the too-bright, too-loud world, and snapped, or said something too acidic, was too harsh or too cold. He knew that he should enjoy this period of companionship while he had it, rather than mourning its inevitable demise, but that was one more failing in his litany of flaws. He ought to remember the *Dao De Ching*. Chapter 64: He who takes hold of a thing loses his hold…

He rolled over again, and pressed the heels of his hands to his forehead. His painkillers had worn off, but taking another dose would involve sitting, standing, walking, finding, opening, pouring, taking, drinking, walking, lying – too many verbs, too many steps, too many movements for his aching limbs.

No, far better to stay huddled under the covers of his warm, soft be-

There was a knock on the door.

It took Chu Wanning a moment to distinguish it from the pounding in his head. He gingerly peeked out from under the duvet.

Knocking again, this time heavier.

He pulled himself out of bed with a groan, and fumbled for the lamp on his bedside table. He wasn't expecting anyone… His head hurt too much to turn on the overhead lights, so he just padded barefoot to the front door of the flat, trying to avoid the piles of books and papers and laundry, and pulled it open.

The lights of the corridor were blinding; he squeezed his eyes shut against them and swallowed down the nausea that the migraine brought with it.

"What the hell are you *doing*?!"

He opened his eyes. Mo Ran stood in front of him, golden-skinned and messy-haired and leather-jacket-clad, holding a pile of lunch boxes.

He closed his eyes again, more against the pain than in surprise, and covered them with his hand. "What?"

“We literally went through a *pile* of threats a few days ago, and you just opened the door?! You didn’t even use the chain! You didn’t even ask who it was!”

“Mo Ran, for heaven’s sake…” He blearily opened his eyes again. Why was Mo Ran angry with him now? He hadn’t even seen him, how could he have made him angry? “So?”

“So! So, I could have been anyone! I could have been here to kill you!”

Chu Wanning rolled his eyes. “You could try.”

“Yeah, I could right now, idiot!”

“Mo Ran!” His anger cut through his headache like a knife. “Don’t you talk to me like that. What are you doing here?”

Mo Ran held out the boxes with a mulish expression. “I made this for you.”

He blinked. He cocked his head to the side. “What? Why?”

“Why-? Because you’re ill! I knew you’d probably not eaten anything. So I made some food with plenty of ginger and garlic and cinnamon. I told Auntie Wang what you looked like in the tidal array lecture and she said that's what I should add.”

Chu Wanning stared at him, eyes suddenly wide despite the brightness.

He could feel his heart, fluttering wildly against his ribcage. His stomach had flipped over, and there was a sharp pain in his fingertips, an excruciating prickle all over his scalp.

Had he dreamed this? Had his chills turned into a fever – was this an hallucination?

“For me?” he said stupidly, looking down at the boxes. A thermos flask hung by a loop from Mo Ran’s wrist.

“Duh.” Mo Ran shifted. “Can I come in?”

The surprised joy *twisted* in his gut, slicing through his throat like a razor blade. Fear, fear and dread; Mo Ran bathed in fluorescent light, Chu Wanning shrouded in the darkness.

“No.”

Mo Ran hadn’t been expecting that answer. He was already moving towards the door. “What?”

“I can’t,” Chu Wanning said helplessly.

Mo Ran looked down at him. Chu Wanning’s eyes were level with his chin. “Wait. Seriously?”

“It’s inappropriate,” he whispered.

“To… enter your flat?” Something was happening on Mo Ran’s face, something Chu Wanning couldn’t interpret. His lips and jaw were tight; a muscle was working in his cheek. “Chu-*laoshi*. You… Other supervisors invite their students round for dinner. They go out to karaoke together.”

Maybe they did. And that was fine, until suddenly it wasn’t. Until someone was murdered, and you were caged like a snarling animal in the back of a police car.

Chu Wanning shook his head, and backed further into the flat, closing the door a little.

“You go to Xue Meng’s house. You came for dinner, a few months ago.”

“That’s different,” he said.

“Why?” Mo Ran asked. His voice was… dangerous, somehow. “Because my uncle and aunt are there?”

“Mn.” His headache was back, redoubled; the world was shifting. His chest felt tight. “I’m sorry. It’s… It’s-“

It was too much. Too many memories, when he was ill and tired and shocked by Mo Ran’s sudden appearance. The tightness in his chest was rising up into his throat, closing it up. His words were growing larger, hooked and barbed, soon to be lodged fast.

And then Mo Ran relaxed, and his face broke into a wide grin. “Ooooh. It’s all right, I understand. My flat’s *soooo* messy too. Don’t worry, Chu-*laoshi*, I’ve already seen your office!” He handed over the lunchboxes and the flask; Chu Wanning nearly dropped them. “Auntie said you need to drink the tea hot, and it’ll help loosen anything in your lungs. Heat the congee over a low heat – but you’ll know all that. I’m away over the weekend, but if you’re still ill on Monday send me an e-mail and I’ll drop round some more stuff, okay?”

“O-okay,” Chu Wanning said. Had… was Mo Ran really not offended? He had seemed so… For a second, he had almost thought that Mo Ran was truly, dangerously angry with him, and now, suddenly, he was all smiles.

Yes, he told himself. Mo Ran wasn’t the type to hide his emotions; he lacked the inclination. It was far more likely that he had simply been confused, and it was Chu Wanning who had been mistaken. He was hardly the best at reading expressions, after all.

“Thank you,” he remembered to say, croaking past the lump in his throat. “Really. This is… Thank you, Mo Ran.”

Mo Ran grinned down at him. His teeth were very white. “No problem. Don’t mention it. I hope you feel better soon.”

He turned to leave, and Chu Wanning began to juggle the boxes to free one of his hands.

“Oh, of course,” Mo Ran said. “Please, let me get that for you.” He slammed the door shut.

*

Mo Ran spent the whole drive to Ya’an in a mire of guilt and fury. How was he going to show his face to Shi Mei?

He’d sworn he’d find evidence against Chu Wanning, but the bastard was being much too careful. He’d been so confident in his ploy with the congee; Chu Wanning would be forced out of politeness to let him in. Mo Ran’s phone was ready to record anything, the location on to prove where he was. But Chu Wanning had refused, with a ridiculous, laughable plea about it being ‘inappropriate’…

It wasn’t! That was the most stupid thing. Every supervisor Mo Ran knew of would let one of their students into their flat; fuck, half of them invited their students round for dinner on a weekly basis! Chu Wanning’s carefulness *proved* his guilt, in Mo Ran’s eyes. Why be so cautious otherwise? Why be so worried about being seen to be doing something inappropriate unless he’d already done it?

He still had time. He had one more term after the Lunar New Year break; he would be Chu Wanning’s student until mid-July. He still had more than six months. He just needed to put his foot on the accelerator.

Shi Mei had invited him to spend the weekend in Ya’an, a break in between the two New Years. It should have been good to see him again, after nearly a month, but Mo Ran felt more guilt than joy. He wouldn’t let him down. He was going to make sure Shi Mei received justice.

At least Shi Mei had a healthy attitude to spice, and had already sussed out the best places to eat. Mo Ran had been languishing for want of a decent hot pot after weeks of eating lunch with Chu Wanning, so they went to Huitouxiang's for a proper Sichuan meal.

The hot pot was shaped like a fountain, with pork bone broth in the inner circle and beef tallow soup in the outer, both eye-wateringly spicy, all chilis and goji and Sichuan peppercorns. Mo Ran's soul felt soothed as the heat flowed through his veins like liquid fire. They dipped swamp eels and pieces of pig blood pudding into sesame oil, and filled the pot with as much beef tongue and tripe as they liked – Chu Wanning didn't like beef either, for fuck's sake.

Shi Mei raised an eyebrow. "A-Ran, I really don't have to know what Chu Wanning would think of every ingredient…"

"Shit, sorry!" Mo Ran grinned apologetically. "You're right, sorry."

Shi Mei was doing well at the medical school. He didn't have much to say about his new supervisor, just a shrug, but apparently he was going to recommend him for a position at Guyueye after his viva, with a starting salary that made Mo Ran's eyes water. It'd be so good to be rich, he thought. Rich with his own money, he meant, not his uncle's. Then he could treat Shi Mei to whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

A couple of doors from the restaurant was the optimistically named Xinchao International Entertainment Club. Mo Ran had to admire their self-aggrandisement, but it was bitterly cold outside, and neither of them fancied walking to try to find somewhere else. It was still early in the evening so the place wasn't too packed, and they were both able to get a seat at the bar.

"How are you doing, though?" Mo Ran asked when they got to the ends of their second drinks. "You know. With the whole…"

"Fine," Shi Mei said, and gave him a smile. "You know me."

“Yeah, I do. And I know that you never want to make a fuss or be a burden to anyone.”

“A-Ran…” Shi Mei looked away, and stirred the melting ice cubes of his drink with his straw. “I miss you. I miss Xue Meng. And I miss Chu Wanning.”

“You shouldn’t miss that piece of shit, but I… I can understand. I miss you too.”

“I know you do.” Pink and purple lights reflected in Shi Mei’s wide eyes. He sighed. “I mostly… Hate that it all came to this. I was so close to finishing, and I could have finished my doctorate without… That’s all I wanted. Why did he have to *push* it? Why couldn’t he have just… But that was it, wasn’t it? We’d run out of time. So that’s why he pushed.”

“I mean… Yeah. He wouldn’t have a hold on you, once you graduated.”

Shi Mei chuckled mirthlessly. “Right. Sure. No hold at all.” Mo Ran had never seen Shi Mei like this. He watched him down the remnants of his glass, which would just be alcohol-tinged meltwater by now. “Surely there was some other way to get what he wanted, without trying to make me do it for him?”

Mo Ran was trying to follow. “I mean, if it was *you* that he wanted…?”

Shi Mei shook his head. “No. I’m just a tool, A-Ran. A means to an end. I never wanted any of this…”

“I know.” Mo Ran put his hand on Shi Mei’s shoulder. “I know. None of this is your fault.”

“I wish that were true. I really do.”

“It *is* true.”

“Maybe. Well. At least it’s not all my fault. You know that, right?”

“Of course. I definitely do! That’s the absolute truth, for sure,” Mo Ran said, nodding eagerly. His head was full, and he had the horrible feeling that he was missing something. “I just need the toilet. I’ll be two seconds, and we’ll get another. Or we can go to that karaoke place over the road. Forget all about that fucker.”

“Sure,” Shi Mei said. He was still looking at the counter. “Whatever you want.”

He looked so miserable, so slender and forlorn. Mo Ran wanted to protect him forever, protect him from Chu Wanning, to assure him that he was innocent and blameless until Shi Mei finally believed it.

But rather more immediately, he wanted to piss.

The toilets were being guarded by a tall man wearing a face-mask. He was still there when Mo Ran came out again, but this time he put a hand on his arm.

“If you’re looking for a good night, I’ve got some stuff,” he said smoothly.

Mo Ran snorted. “Don’t need it, mate.”

“Oh, I didn’t think *you* did. Maybe for your friend, though. Or for anyone that takes your fancy.” He brought out a small bottle.

“Poppers?” Rong Jiu used them regularly; they could be bought at plenty of the nightclubs they frequented on a discreet night out.

“Not quite. Far more potent and long-lasting.”

Mo Ran felt a prickle of distaste, and then a rush of worry for Shi Mei. He shoved the man back against the wall, his forearm braced across his chest. “Is that fucking rohypnol?”

“No! Fucking hell.” The other man shoved him back with surprising strength. “Who the fuck wants that? Some dead fish under you? No, it just helps your zero out. Relaxes the muscles, no anxiety, makes them more horny. No inhibitions. Just say you don’t want it next time, no need to be an asshole about it.”

“Don’t be a fucking creep lurking outside the toilets, then,” Mo Ran said, but he eased back. “Sounds like poppers to me.”

“As I said, more powerful, lasts longer. Swallowed instead of inhaled. Otherwise, yeah, basically. Five hundred yuan.”

Mo Ran laughed in his face.

“What? It’s good stuff!”

Shi Mei was still sitting at the bar. Mo Ran made a beeline for him. “Let’s go to Keke.”

“I’ve just bought another drink,” Shi Mei said. “After this one.”

“No, seriously, let’s go now. I’ll buy you another.”

Shi Mei looked at him. “What’s the hurry?”

“There’s just… There’s some fucking creeper, up by the toilets.” He didn’t want the guy to catch sight of Shi Mei. “Let’s go.”

Shi Mei yielded to him, as trusting and easy as ever. “All right. As long as you buy the next one.”

Chapter 12: Killing With a Borrowed Knife

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so, so much for all your comments last chapter, they are such a motivation to carry on writing! I am going away this weekend, so I apologise in advance for any delays in replying! <3

The end of January brought the end of the Fall Semester, and an invitation to the Xues for a celebratory dinner.

Mo Ran had once asked his uncle where he had met Chu Wanning. Xue Zhengyong had made his millions in technology and real estate, and had spent a very quiet and nondescript term as Mayor of Chengdu, the living epitome of Laozi's ideal leader. His pivot into academia came after his brother's death, when he dedicated himself to the revitalisation of Sisheng University and the college town around it.

While he had been working for CNSA, Chu Wanning had made regular trips to the Xichang Satellite Launch Centre in Sichuan. On his first one, he had run into Xue Zhengyong, who had remembered him from a conference he had attended with Rong Yan in Hong Kong. The older man invited the younger to dinner, and despite their vast differences in personality and age, each recognised in the other a genuine compassion and a sincere, selfless desire to do good in the world.

"So I invited him to dinner every time he came to Sichuan," Xue Zhengyong had said. "I know Yuheng gives a rather haughty impression, but that's all show. I honestly don't think I've ever met a kinder person. He's so soft, but he just doesn't express it like us. A mouth as sharp as a knife and heart as soft as tofu."

He was pleased by this, and mulled it over a little more. "The funny thing is… he cares about a thousand people as though he personally knew and loved every single one. I certainly can't do that. His brain is just different. Don't get me wrong, sometimes those differences can be infuriating!" Xue Zhengyong laughed. "He can be stubborn and rigid and uncompromising, but those flaws and his compassion all stem from the same soul. They're two sides of the same coin. I just remember that, and any irritation I have just melts away."

“Was supporting him worth burning your bridges with the Party, though?”

“Oh, yes,” Xue Zhengyong had replied. “He was younger than you are now, only eighteen, the first time he came to Sichuan. Very young, and very alone. Like you, Ran'er. I won’t say that doing the right thing is its own reward. But what I will say is that a clear conscience and easy sleep are luxuries that money can’t buy.”

Even more astonishingly, Xue Zhengyong seemed to genuinely enjoy Chu Wanning’s company. They made excellent drinking partners, and usually fell into a kind of double-act as a night drew on, Chu Wanning playing the straight man impeccably.

Auntie Wang prepared a feast of shredded tofu in chicken soup, sweet and sour squirrel fish, braised silver carp, and soy pork – all Jiangnan style dishes to appeal to Chu Wanning’s palate, instead of the usual hotpot they might have prepared. Xue Meng would be flying to the national round of the robotics competition right after the New Year, but had taken the night off so that he could chew Chu Wanning’s ear off about the other competitors and his strategy. On the other side, Xue Zhengyong wanted to talk about the latest Heads of Department meeting and Lucan’s last fuck-up, and so Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were barely able to exchange a word until the plates had all been cleared away.

With his mother and father in the kitchen, Xue Meng had quietened a little. It never failed to astonish Mo Ran how much energy he borrowed from his parents. No, not energy: confidence. But he was looking tired after so many days in the lab, and Mo Ran suddenly realised that his cousin was actually nervous.

Chu Wanning glanced towards the kitchen door, and then slid a small package across the table to Xue Meng.

“What’s that?”

Chu Wanning huffed impatiently. “Just open it and see.”

“Here?” It was customary to wait until a gift-giver had gone before opening a present, but Xue Meng couldn’t contain himself. Courtesy was not his strong suit.

Chu Wanning shrugged. “If you like.”

It was wrapped in a purple cloth, which Xue Meng instantly discarded with a confused look. Inside was a small rectangular stainless-steel plaque with hand-etched calligraphy.

Longcheng, designed and created by Xue Meng

“For the competition,” Chu Wanning said.

“Oh, wow!” Xue Meng was beaming again. “This is perfect! I knew I should have got one done, but I didn’t know where – thank you!”

Mo Ran was looking at Chu Wanning, and noticed that his ears were red. He was embarrassed about something, beyond the awkwardness of giving a gift. “You made it.”

Chu Wanning looked at him with electric fury, confirming his guess.

“Wait – you did this, Chu-*laoshi*?”

Chu Wanning shrugged, looking away again at a painting on the wall. “I already had most of the tools, and there were some tutorials online. Once I’d practiced a few it didn’t take long. If you don’t like it I can go to a professional-“

“No!” Xue Meng hugged it to its chest. “It looks perfect. I’d never have guessed. And even if it wasn’t, I’d want this one, because Chu-*laoshi* made it himself for me!”

Mo Ran would have rolled his eyes at this. He wanted to. But he knew that, before everything with Shi Mei, if Chu Wanning had made something with his own hands for him, he would have treasured it until his dying day.

"I don't want to attach it to Longcheng, it'll get all scraped and tarnished!"

"That's what it's for, Xue Meng, don't be so silly," Chu Wanning said sharply, but Mo Ran had learnt to read him in the last couple of months; he was touched.

"I'm going to win," Xue Meng said, with sudden seriousness. "I'm going to make you proud."

"I just told you to stop being so silly." Chu Wanning reached across the table and flicked Xue Meng in the centre of his forehead. "You've worked hard, and learnt a lot. I know you'll compete with integrity. That's all that matters to me. I'm already proud, idiot."

Xue Meng surged to his feet, and before Chu Wanning had a chance to escape, he had captured him in a bone-crushing hug. Mo Ran watched as Chu Wanning's arms shot out, fingers stretching and then clenching, before he finally, carefully patted Xue Meng's back.

"You'll be fine. I want to know everything," he said, and Mo Ran thought that *that* was the real act of generosity, because Xue Meng really would tell him *everything*.

"I will! I will, and I'll send photos, and video-call you!" Xue Meng finally realised how tense Chu Wanning was, and ended the ordeal of the hug.

"Don't embarrass me with the other competitors, though! Don't be arrogant; be gracious whether you win or lose, and don't boast."

"I won't," Xue Meng lied with a grin. "I'll be the epitome of modesty. Completely serene."

Xue Zhengyong and Wang Chuqing came back inside, and admired the plaque. They had all drunk, and so instead of ordering a taxi, Chu Wanning said that he would walk home.

“I’ll go with you,” Mo Ran said.

“Good boy, Ran'er – I’ll feel better if you go together,” Xue Zhengyong said. “I’m sorry I can’t drive you!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Chu Wanning said again, and thanked them for the meal. Mo Ran made an excuse about having lots of work to do the next day, and received plenty of compliments on his diligence.

It was a freezing night, with the temperature below zero. It should have been awkward and uncomfortable, walking for over forty minutes in almost total silence, but it actually... It was actually kind of nice. It calmed Mo Ran's mind, for some reason.

He looked up as they walked into the town proper. It was rare that Mo Ran was able to see stars; the light pollution in Wuchang was comparatively low, but Sichuan was so often overcast that even in the drier month of January so clear a sky was sporadic.

“There’s Beidou,” Chu Wanning suddenly said. He traced out a shape. “The constellation, I mean. Not a satellite.”

Mo Ran glanced down at him. “Did you ever want to do the practical side? Actually go up into space?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “I’d never pass a medical. Heart damage.”

“Oh. Sorry. … do you miss it?” Mo Ran asked. “CNSA?”

“Sometimes. I miss the work, when something finally fell into place. I miss… the comradery, in Mission Control. When Tianwen touched down, I knew that I was feeling the exact same emotion as everyone else in the room. I’d never felt that before.” He shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. Mo Ran had never heard him speak like this. “Still. Jiào xué xiāng cháng,” he added, quoting the chengyu that both teachers and students benefitted from teaching.

Right, thought Mo Ran, *and you benefit from having access to plenty of younger people you have power over.*

The thought made his stomach flip over. He had to keep reminding himself of it, because otherwise, talking to Chu Wanning made it feel… impossible.

Chu Wanning continued. “I’m very proud of you as well, Mo Ran,” he said, very softly. He was staring directly ahead. Mo Ran looked down at him in astonishment, and his jaw was tight. “I know I don’t say these things often enough. But you’ve worked hard the last few months.”

Then he stopped walking.

Mo Ran was still staring at Chu Wanning, gobsmacked. Chu Wanning put out his arm and stepped in front of him.

It was ludicrous. Mo Ran was so much taller than Chu Wanning that he could just look out over his head at the man who had stepped in front of them, blocking the street.

He was wearing a leather jacket, and he looked like a tool. Not like Mo Ran when *he* wore a leather jacket, obviously.

“What’s up?” Leather Jacket said. He sounded almost bored. “Phones, wallets, watches.”

“Fuck off,” Chu Wanning snarled. He was trembling, but it was in fury rather than fear.

“It’s fine,” Mo Ran said. Oh, it would feel *so good* to have a proper fight now, and he longed to show off in front of Chu Wanning. But he also knew the last few years had made him softer, and however good you might be, it only took one hit to kill you.

But his heart had begun to beat loud and strong. He could hear his own blood in his ears.

I’d love to run into you in a dark alleyway.

If Leather Jacket had a friend, that would leave Chu Wanning defenceless. The idiot was actually trying to *shield Mo Ran*, as though Mo Ran didn’t have several inches and sixty pounds on him.

There will be no escape.

Odds are it was just a mugging. Mo Ran knew his uncle would replace everything without a thought. “I’m taking my phone out. Chu-*laoshi*, just give yours, it’s not worth it.”

Chu Wanning didn’t take his eyes off the man in front of them as he handed over his wallet and phone. He was vibrating with rage.

I’m going to knock your teeth out so you can suck my cock better.

The mugger held up Chu Wanning’s cheap mobile. “What the fuck is this?”

“Give it back, if you don’t want it.”

“Funny. Watches?”

“Don’t wear one.”

“What about your boyfriend?” the man replied, jerking his chin at Mo Ran.

You are not a human being.

Mo Ran’s heart was beating like a drum. He was breathing fast, and he felt both light and heavy. Swift and powerful.

“*You*-!”

“Here,” Mo Ran said, pulling off his own and tossing it. Out of the corner of his eye he could see another man lurking, wiry and lean, just to Chu Wanning’s right. His instinct had been correct. “And wallet.”

Leather Jacket had opened Chu Wanning’s to see how much cash he had. “Chu Wanning – well, shit. You’re that fucking professor.”

What kind of object are you?

“So he is. Our local celebrity *traitor*,” the wiry man said. He emerged from the shadows, revealing a detailed facial tattoo, and fisted his hand in Chu Wanning’s ponytail.

Mo Ran’s whole body was flooded with adrenaline and cortisol, ready to fight, but Chu Wanning was still faster. He was right-handed, but lead with his left, spinning on the wiry man with all the momentum their close position could give him.

There was no hesitation. He went straight for Tattoo’s nose with the heel of his palm, pushing upwards with exquisitely efficient violence; there was a snap, a gurgle, but Chu Wanning had already punched again with his right hand, straight to the man’s temple.

It was impressive as fuck.

Mo Ran didn't waste any more time watching. He leapt on Leather Jacket, landing a punch to the man's sternum and shaking off one to his shoulder. He shoved into the other man's space, going for the solar plexus, and the next punch sailed safely around his head.

They were grappling, but Mo Ran's punches were landing more quickly, with more power. He dared to glance over, and saw the wiry man was curled up on the floor, with Chu Wanning kicking him from above.

Mo Ran had absolutely nothing against kicking a man while he was down. After all, it was the best way of ensuring he didn't get up again. Chu Wanning had long legs and thin arms, so kicking kept him at a safer distance.

But just as he looked over to check on Chu Wanning, Chu Wanning had glanced back to check on him. He looked past him, eyes stretched wide. "*Knife!*"

Time seemed to slow down. Mo Ran saw the butterfly knife coming up, aiming at his chest; he knocked it away with his left hand, and headbutted Leather Jacket so hard that he saw stars. Leather Jacket dropped like a stone.

He turned around. Chu Wanning had stopped kicking; he stood in the centre of the road, eyes huge. He was hyperventilating. He didn't even seem to notice Tattoo stand up behind him, blood dripping from his nose, and grab him from behind.

Mo Ran scooped up the knife from the ground and advanced.

The wiry man had his forearm tight across Chu Wanning's neck; Chu Wanning's hands were raised, trembling, but he didn't try to pull his attacker's arm down.

“Don’t come any closer!”

Mo Ran didn’t reply. A deep calm had come over him, as cold as stone. He was going to kill this man, and what’s more, it was going to be *easy*.

Leather Jacket was stirring on the floor behind him. He would be next. They had touched what belonged to him. They had tried to hurt Chu Wanning, and they were going to pay with their lives. It was that simple.

The tattooed man must have seen it in his eyes. He released Chu Wanning, shoving him forwards. Chu Wanning gasped, eyes fixed on the knife held between them, but Mo Ran pulled it out to the side just in time. He caught Chu Wanning with his left arm and dragged him close, flush against his chest.

He could feel him shaking. His mouth was level with Mo Ran’s collarbone; he felt the shuddering ghost of his breath against his neck.

Tattoo was backing away. He pulled Leather Jacket to his feet – “Come on, come *on*!” – and helped him to run.

Chu Wanning was weakly trying to push away from his chest; Mo Ran instinctively resisted, until he realised that Chu Wanning was trying to look at his body. Chu Wanning’s hands were pulling the side of his jacket away, long, pale fingers quivering across his t-shirt.

“*Knife*,” he croaked, and understanding flooded Mo Ran’s brain, liquid and warm.

“It’s fine,” he said. “Didn’t touch me. Thanks for the warning.”

“I thought-“ Chu Wanning released a painful shudder of a breath. “Blood- Saw- I thought-“

“Blood?” Mo Ran looked down, and there was indeed blood on Chu Wanning’s white-clad shoulder. There was a long gash on the back of his left hand, where he’d knocked the blade away.

“Just my hand,” he said. He was suddenly seized with the utterly ridiculous instinct to press a kiss to Chu Wanning’s hair.

It was the signal to move away; he had only ever been this close to lovers. Muscle memory was a hell of a thing. He held open his jacket to show his undamaged chest. “See? Absolutely fine. Just my hand, look.”

Chu Wanning’s knees buckled.

“Whoa, hey!” Mo Ran caught him, hissing as a spasm racked his hand. Chu Wanning’s face was paper-white, and covered with a sheen of sweat despite the sub-zero temperature. “You afraid of blood or something?” His hand was beginning to *hurt*. “Look, I know you don’t like anyone in your space, but I need to get you into your flat, okay? You’ve got a first aid kit?”

Chu Wanning mouthed something, but no sound came out.

“Hey, Chu-*laoshi*. Look at me, yeah? Just look at me.” He waited until Chu Wanning’s eyes jumped to his own. They were completely black, reflecting the streetlights like a field of stars. “That’s good. That’s good. Just like that. Just nod or shake your head for me. You got a first aid kit at your place?”

Chu Wanning nodded.

Chapter 13: Considering the Source of Drinking Water

Chapter Notes

> Would Chu Wanning really share so many details? Possibly not. Unfortunately, I don't have access to magic memory scrolls for Mo Ran to watch his backstory, so instead he's drugged to the gills, and reasoning that Mo Ran can search for all of this online, so he might as well tell him!

"I'm fine," Chu Wanning whispered against his shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah, I believe you," Mo Ran said. "Just like I believed you the other eight times."

They had reached the front door of Chu Wanning's building. He looked terrible. His face was white and uncharacteristically sweaty, and he was so weak he was practically leaning on Mo Ran even as he tried to make an appearance of pushing him away. When he wasn't doing that, his hand was pressed over his heart.

His heart. He'd said that he couldn't be an astronaut because of heart damage. *Shit*. "Are you having a heart attack and not telling me?!" Mo Ran demanded furiously.

"*No*," Chu Wanning said with an attempt at a withering voice. Then he looked down. "… but it becomes more likely if- I just need my pills."

"Don't you have them on you?!"

"Forgot."

"For fuck's sake-" Mo Ran stopped himself. How had this idiot managed to survive until now? Did he really care so little about his own life?

In a single crystalline moment of clarity, he realised that it was like the spice. Chu Wanning refused to admit weakness. His stupid pride wouldn't allow it. What Mo Ran hadn't realised was that he refused to admit it even to himself.

Chu Wanning slowly punched the building's entry code in: 3799. Chu Wanning's eyes were drooping shut, and his cheek was resting against Mo Ran's shoulder. If he hadn't been so worried, and his hand hadn't been so painful, he might have thought it was cute… "Almost there."

He helped Chu Wanning up the stairs. Chu Wanning was fumbling with his keys, and clearly unable to use them even if he managed not to drop them. Mo Ran plucked them out of his hand, and Chu Wanning didn't even resist. That was worrying. "This one?" He opened the door.

Mo Ran had thought he was prepared for what Chu Wanning's flat would look like. Having seen his office in the lab, he knew that Chu Wanning could be untidy. He tended to become absorbed in a particular project, emerging hours later with no idea of what time it was and when he had last eaten, and for a person like that, tidiness also tended to fall by the wayside.

The light switch, it turned out, was rigged to turn on several small lamps, rather than the overhead lights. His first thought when he turned on the lamps was that Chu Wanning had been burgled.

Then he realised.

There were books everywhere. The bookshelves were stuffed full, every square inch utilised – Chu Wanning must have been a monster at Tetris – but there were mounds on every surface, along with waist-high piles on the floor. There were three whiteboards, all covered in scribbles and equations. Paintings and calligraphy scrolls hung on every available section of wall, and papers and discarded laundry carpeted the floor. A bundle of tai chi swords, both wooden and metal, were propped in one corner. There was a riot of green; houseplants, plenty of them, but at least seven penzai trees and landscapes as well. One table alone seemed to have escaped the chaos; on this was a stringed instrument that Mo Ran assumed was a guqin. A stack of takeaway containers was balanced precariously on top of the bin.

“Fuck me.”

“This is *inappropriate*,” Chu Wanning said, as though Mo Ran were the one clinging to him. His words were coming out strangely, thick and irregular, as though each one was an almost unbearable effort. “You shouldn’t be in here.”

“No one should be in here without life insurance and a hazmat suit.” He supported Chu Wanning to the shape that he assumed was a sofa, and swept exam papers, callipers, a pair of penzai secateurs and a dial indicator onto the floor.

Chu Wanning collapsed onto it despite himself. His hands were fluttering, and his breath was coming out in shaky puffs. “Your hand-”

“My hand can wait. Where’s your medicine? Do I need to call an ambulance?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “It’s just atrial fibrillation. Makes me dizzy, tired. It’s not a heart attack.”

“How do you know?”

“Had them before.”

Mo Ran could have screamed. “When the fuck did you- Doesn’t matter. What do you need?”

“Propranolol. *Pǔ nài luò ěr*. It’ll also say *xīn dé ān*. Should be some in the kitchen drawer, or in the bathroom cabinet. First aid kit… First aid kit’s in the kitchen, under the medicine drawer.”

“Right.” He found it easily enough; one drawer was stuffed full of bottles of pills. He sounded out the name to make sure he had the right one, and picked out some painkillers for himself. He found the kit, wrapped a tea towel around his hand, and poured out a glass of

water. The kitchen was clean in comparison to the rest of the flat. Chu Wanning clearly didn't use it much.

Chu Wanning managed to tap out three pills and swallowed them with the water. "Thank you…"

"It's all right. Just… fucking scared me, that's all. How long do they take to kick in?"

"Soon. It's already…" Chu Wanning closed his eyes. He was leant back in the sofa as though holding up his head took too much energy. Then he opened them. "First aid kit…"

"Got it here. Just stopping the bleeding first."

"Hold your hand up. Yes. Like that…"

Chu Wanning was looking at him very oddly. He looked young, suddenly, without his usual glacial mask. "I'm grateful to you, Mo Ran, but you can't be here. It's-"

"It's inappropriate, yeah." Mo Ran didn't roll his eyes. Instead, his gaze pinned Chu Wanning to the sofa. "First of all, it's not. Supervisors have students round for dinner all the time. You're meant to be our family. So, no, it's only inappropriate if you make it inappropriate."

Chu Wanning shook his head. "That's not…"

"As you've said yourself. A filthy mind will always see filth."

Chu Wanning inhaled sharply. Mo Ran's stomach seemed to open up a pit for his heart to fall into, because in the dim lights, it looked like Chu Wanning's eyes were shimmering.

He made his voice gentler. “So. I’m not leaving, and you’re not exactly in any fit state to make me, are you?”

“No… That’s…” Chu Wanning blinked, with a strange expression on his face. “That’s true…”

And then he did something completely alien and completely unexpected. He relaxed.

Mo Ran knew to quit while he was ahead. Chu Wanning was lying back again, and Mo Ran took the opportunity to stand up and look over the bookshelves.

On one shelf was a sheet of gold. Inscribed on it was a design of orbits and planets, and the words *Planetary Exploration of China – MARS – Presented to Dr. Chu Wanning on the successful launch of Tianwen-1*.

Around it were the physics and engineering books Mo Ran had expected, but hundreds more: history, both Chinese and worldwide, poetry, art books, novels, English books, Russian, Japanese, Korean. Military history, music, mathematics – so many titles that Mo Ran barely understood.

His mind was only half on them. Behind him, Chu Wanning’s breathing was becoming deeper, steadier.

On the very top shelf were a line of books that looked somehow out of place. They were well-thumbed paperbacks, with spines that had once been printed in garish colours, now faded through time and use.

Journey to the West, The Peculiar Knights-Errant of the Jianghu, Legend of the Swordsmen of the Mountains of Shu, The Crane-Iron Pentalogy, The Book and the Sword…

“Chu-*laoshi*… do you like fantasy novels?”

“What?”

Mo Ran turned around, and Chu Wanning’s eyes were open again. There was even some colour in his face again, though it was concentrated in a blush of embarrassment.

“You like *fantasy novels,*” he said. The adrenaline of the fight was fading, but the relief that was rushing to replace it made him feel strangely giddy rather than tired.

Chu Wanning was struggling to sit up straight. “No. I don’t. Maybe. I used to. So?”

“Oh, nothing,” Mo Ran said. A wicked grin was spreading slowly across his face. “I just didn’t know. I should have been calling you *Shizun* all this time.”

“Shut up,” Chu Wanning snapped – or as close as he could come to snapping, with his slurred, weak voice. “You’re being stupid.”

“Shizun!” Mo Ran placed his hand over his heart. “You’re hurting this disciple’s feelings!”

“I’ll be hurting more than that in a minute. Get over here, or get out.”

“*Shi,* shizun!” Mo Ran moved another pile of papers off the coffee table, and perched obediently.

It was a nasty cut, but fundamentally shallow – no major muscle damage. Chu Wanning managed to sit up, and began to clean the cut with an antiseptic wipe.

“Ow!”

“Sorry. Don’t move…”

His hands were still trembling as he opened up a new line of steri-strips, but with nowhere near the violence of before. Chu Wanning looked sleepy and heavy lidded, and the tip of his tongue poked out of his mouth as he concentrated on applying the first strip.

No way. No *fucking* way. That tongue did things to Mo Ran’s heart. This was unreal. This could not actually be happening.

Chu Wanning carefully applied the first skin closure, as though Mo Ran were a precious project he was working on. “My supervisor gave them to me,” he said softly.

Mo Ran looked up at him. “The martial arts books?”

“Mn.” His voice was low and somehow dreamy. “I was in hospital for a while, during my first doctorate. My supervisor brought me plenty of work to do, but I was on a lot of painkillers, and at night I couldn’t work, but I also couldn’t sleep. Bad dreams. She bought all of them for me.”

“Was that…” He searched his memory. He knew that Chu Wanning had mentioned his first supervisor – ah, when they were discussing what constituted ‘important’ hate-mail. “Rong Yan?”

Chu Wanning looked at him in surprise, before ducking his head again. “That’s right. She liked them too. So did her son, but he preferred the films, and games – he had one of those consoles.”

“Lucky bastard.”

“Mn. Not really, in the end.”

Mo Ran skirted the subject like he would a crack in a frozen lake. He remembered another thing suddenly. His uncle had let it slip. He'd met Yuheng – as he called Chu Wanning – when he was sixteen, and just out of the hospital. "Why were you in the hospital? Was it your heart?" He suddenly thought of the video of Chu Wanning giving his guqin performance, and his incredibly short hair. "Shit. Did you have cancer?"

"What? No. What made you think that?"

"I looked up a video of you playing the guqin. You were practically bald."

"Oh, that. No. I was in a state orphanage until I was six, and they kept our heads shaved. Easier to deal with lice or fleas. When I was adopted, my guardian kept both our hair short."

Mo Ran looked at Chu Wanning's ponytail of thick, silken, luxuriously long hair. Uh-*huh*.

"Man. He won the adoption lottery."

Chu Wanning looked at him for any signs of mockery. When he didn't find it, he sighed. "People used to say that to him all the time. He would always say that I was the lucky one, to be adopted by someone who was able to properly hone my gifts. He said that the value in a statue isn't in the wood, but in the skill of the sculptor carving it. That if it wasn't for his eye, I would never have been adopted. He was probably right. I was a very difficult child."

Mo Ran scoffed. "I can't imagine you being disobedient even at that age."

"I wasn't. But I *was* difficult. Fussy, sensitive, bad-tempered." Mo Ran couldn't possibly imagine *that*. Chu Wanning applied another steri-strip. "And abnormal."

Mo Ran did him the courtesy of not denying it. Whatever Chu Wanning was, *normal* wasn't it. "So it *was* your heart."

“No. Not originally… Ah.” Chu Wanning’s hands clenched, and he jerked his head. “I… Damn it.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Mo Ran said. He didn’t know why he offered it, when he was burning to know.

“It’s all available online, if you look. It’ll have been pushed back, but it was a big story at the time…” Another steri-strip. “And it… I owe you an explanation, for what happened tonight.”

“It’s all right.”

“It’s not. I completely lost control. I was useless.” Chu Wanning said it so bitterly. He looked exhausted, and his eyelids were drooping. “My guardian – Huaizui, he never wanted me to call him my father – was… Hm. He was a strict man. When he realised that I was extraordinary, he became even more strict.”

From anyone else, it would have been the most insufferable sentence ever uttered. Mo Ran should have howled in outraged hilarity and punched him, and he would have, in anyone else had said it (Xue Meng came to mind). But Chu Wanning said it so softly, so matter-of-factly. As though it was an unfortunate truth, something to be grieved and regretted.

“I was ten when I went to Oxford. Thirteen, when I started my doctorate at Rufeng. The youngest person to earn a modern doctorate was Kim Ung-Yong, from South Korea, when he was fifteen. Huaizui was determined that I was going to beat him. It was- He never told me the whole story, it was something to do with his own teacher. But just before I turned fifteen, there was the earthquake in Sichuan.”

Chu Wanning peeled another steri-strip from the laminated card, but Mo Ran’s cut was closed; he rolled it in between his fingers instead. “I wanted to take a year out of my doctorate. To volunteer for the relief effort. I know a teenager wouldn’t have been able to do much, but I saw what it was like on the television, and I couldn’t just… sit writing about quantum physics. I couldn’t. The first time I went to Linyi, there was this child – I won’t go into it, but since I’d encountered him, I’d been more and more… I was certain that I should be in the real world, helping real people. Not just messing around with equations and theories. I needed to be doing something.”

He glanced up at Mo Ran again. “I’m sorry, I’m going on and on, your hand must be hurting-”

“No, no,” Mo Ran, and impulsively reached to grip Chu Wanning’s other hand. “It’s distracting me. Can’t even feel it. Go on.”

Chu Wanning swallowed. He was looking down at the floor, completely unable to meet Mo Ran’s eyes. As though he was ashamed.

“I was locked in my room for six months. Not allowed to leave, except with him, and only then to see Rong Yan. No television, no internet, no novels. He covered up the window, so I couldn’t see outside. Nothing, until I gave up on the idea. Well. I can be quite stubborn.”

Mo Ran snorted in laughter, and his heart felt warm when Chu Wanning gave him a sidelong glance and a small smile. “Quite. Only a little.”

“The tiniest bit stubborn,” Mo Ran agreed. “Just a sliver.”

Chu Wanning huffed in amusement. It seemed to give him the strength to open up the dressing. He applied it so tenderly, making sure it was smooth against Mo Ran’s skin. “There… I, um. Sorry. I really shouldn’t have taken so much of the medication after alcohol… I, um. I broke my window. Climbed out. Went to Rong Yan. She said that she’d support me, if I wanted the year to think about what I was going to do. She’d make sure my studentship was waiting for me when I got back. Maybe that was more of an issue than I realised at the time – the money. Money…”

“It’s usually money.”

“Mn. I went back, and I told Huaizui that I didn’t care about finishing the doctorate before I turned sixteen. He said that if that was the case, then I could leave and never see him again. I…” He inhaled. Exhaled. “I thanked him, for raising me. And I said that if that was what he wanted, then that was what I had to do. And then he stabbed me.”

Mo Ran dropped Chu Wanning's hand. He blinked; the words were simply incomprehensible. "Sorry – what?"

"He stabbed me. Four times, with a kitchen knife." Chu Wanning was twisting his hands, rubbing the one that Mo Ran had released. "That's why I- I thought that man had stabbed you. I thought he'd stabbed you in the heart, and I- I thought it had happened again, but to *you*- I couldn't-"

Mo Ran reached out and took Chu Wanning's hand again; he seemed to need that. That was something he could do, while his mind tried to make sense of Chu Wanning's words, of Chu Wanning's twisting face. "Hey, hey, I get it. I get it. I understand now."

"I'm not normally such a coward."

Mo Ran couldn't help but laugh – it was a cold, harsh bark of a thing. "Of all the words I've ever called you in my head – and I'm sorry, shizun, but there have been many – that's not one that's ever appeared."

"If they hadn't run off-"

"But they did. Because they were a couple of cowards. You were fucking amazing. I never knew tai chi really did teach you how to fight outside of films. Maybe you can teach me some."

"Of course. If you'd like…" Chu Wanning was having more and more difficulty keeping his eyes open. "How's your hand?"

"Much better. I took the liberty of nicking a few of your painkillers."

"Good. That's good…"

“Is he still in prison?” Mo Ran felt that strange thrill again, that strange calmness. Whatever Chu Wanning had done since, whatever justice Mo Ran would bring to him, no fifteen-year-old deserved to be stabbed by their own father. “Your guardian?”

“No. He pled guilty. Called the ambulance, confessed. They made it, what’s it called. Intentional infliction of harm. So he’s out now. I’ve not seen him.”

“Good.” Because if Chu Wanning had, Mo Ran would have to kill him too. It should have disturbed him, how easily the thought came. But it didn’t. “How are *you* feeling?”

“Better. Heart’s slower. Just makes me very tired…”

“Pretty much the only thing that could possibly make you drunk, from what my uncle tells me. If we ever have a drinking competition, I’ll make sure you take some of your prop-whatever to even the odds.”

Chu Wanning was in the slow process of slumping over. “Hm…”

“Let me help you to bed.”

“Mn. That really *would* be inappropriate…” Chu Wanning rested his head on the arm of the sofa. “Fine here. Usually sleep… Taxi…”

“Don’t worry, I’ll order a taxi. Don’t fancy a run-in with our friends. No, no,” he added when those words visibly caused Chu Wanning to panic. He pushed him back down. “I told you. Don’t worry. I’ll get a taxi right from the door, and I’ll let my uncle know what happened.”

“Uncle…” Chu Wanning murmured nonsensically.

Mo Ran waited. Chu Wanning's breathing evened out, and he curled up tighter on the sofa as he fell into a drugged sleep.

And Mo Ran stood in his flat, alone.

Chapter 14: This Wretched Morning

“What are you doing, Wanning?” Huaizui says without looking up from his work.

He’s only lived with Huaizui for a few months, and it takes Chu Wanning a moment to parse this. He lowers the fan; it’s too big for him to hold with just one hand. “I’m… fanning you.”

Huaizui lets his pen fall with a clatter. “Don’t be obtuse. We’ve talked about this.”

Don't be obtuse is Huaizui-code. It means that Chu Wanning is being too literal-minded again. Chu Wanning goes through the rules of inference and his syllogisms in his mind, imagining the logic gates. *If not this, then that. If not what*, *then why*. *Why* was he fanning?

“The fan’s broken. And it’s hot, so I thought-”

“And you thought that I can’t fan myself? That if I were hot, I would need you to help me? Do you think that I’m stupid, or lazy?”

“No!” Something, quickly smothered, blazes at the injustice of such a harsh assumption. “You’re busy.”

“I *am* busy. And you have interrupted me, with this... display. So, what do you want?”

“I just-” He can feel his throat closing up; words, never easy, are becoming more difficult by the second. “I just…”

“You just- what? If you’ve come in here playing the sycophant you must want something, Wanning, so stop wasting my time and tell me what it is.”

He wants Huaizui to smile at him. He dreams that Huaizui might move over at his desk to see let Chu Wanning see what he had been working on. The desk is too high for Chu Wanning to see, so Huaizui would have to lift him up, and sit him on his lap. Maybe... maybe even put his arms around him and pull him into a hug, like he'd seen on television at the orphanage, to say that he is a kind boy, a good boy.

The words curdle in his stomach. He presses his lips together and shakes his head, blinking furiously. Huaizui hates tears. He thinks that they are weak and manipulative.

Huaizui sighs in exasperation. "I know that you have better things to be doing with your time. They might have been happy to let you fritter the hours away in that hole I brought you out of, but here, I expect you to show some gratitude and *work*. You should be practicing your piece for the competition next week."

He picks up his pen again, and the pen is now a knife.

*

Chu Wanning woke with a gasp. The sunlight was blinding, streaming through the window of the main room. He squeezed his eyes shut; he must have fallen asleep on the sofa again.

But his neck didn't hurt, and he was warm.

He opened his eyes carefully. There was a pillow underneath his head, and the duvet from his bed was tucked around him. What the hell?

He pushed himself up, swinging his feet down. The flat was… different. He could see the floor.

There was no longer a carpet of exams and discarded clothes. The laundry basket by the kitchen counter was full. The top of the bin had been cleared of takeaway containers. Three

neat piles of papers lay on the desk. There were still piles of books, but they had been consolidated into three towers against a wall.

He rubbed his head in confusion. He felt heavy and fog-brained, physically weak. His heart must have been bad; he could feel the tell-tale ache around his ribs. But there was something…

A piece of paper, folded and left on the (now sparkling) coffee table that so that his eyes would fall on it when he woke up.

Good morning, Shizun!

The image of Mo Ran's delighted, mischievous grin. The way he dragged out the syllables of the title.

The previous night washed over Chu Wanning like an arctic wave. Oh, no. Oh, *no*.

Good morning, Shizun!

Or good afternoon, I'm not one to judge, haha

I took the liberty of tidying a little bit, there was a looooong wait for the taxi. Everyone's on holiday for the New Year. I'll send you an e-mail as soon as I get in, I'm sorry I didn't get our phones back from those bastards. Hand is feeling much better, hope you're all right, send me an e-mail to let me know you're not dead. If you've actually had a heart attack, I'll kill you, haha!

Chu Wanning groaned, and collapsed back onto his pillow. His pillow! Mo Ran must have gone into his bedroom to find- Oh, it was excruciating, it was unfathomable, it was absolutely unbearable. Mo Ran, in his *bedroom*.

He wished he *had* had a heart attack. Then he wouldn't have made such an absolute *fool* of himself.

First, he had frozen. Mo Ran had been in danger, and Chu Wanning had *frozen*, like a coward, or an idiot. No. Worse than those. Like someone mentally deficient, mad with memories. One sight of a knife, and that was it: his body had refused to move, and in his panic his heart had gone wild.

He had- He crushed his hands to his eyes until he saw stars. He could feel the leather of Mo Ran's jacket under his cheek. The firm plane and subtle dip of his shoulder. And then he had allowed Mo Ran into his flat, too weak to resist.

Weak. Weak physically, weak mentally, and weak for Mo Ran most of all. He had never felt more ashamed or embarrassed.

He felt acid creeping up his throat; his scalp was freezing cold; his face was burning; his ridiculous, treacherous heart was pounding again. Why hadn't Huaizui finished the damn job when he'd had the chance?! Then Chu Wanning wouldn't have to be feeling this humiliation, like a punch in the stomach.

Mo Ran had been in his flat. What if the neighbours had seen? He'd been *clinging* to him; oh, he was going to be sick.

No, he wasn't.

He just *wanted* to be sick.

He pulled the duvet over his head, as though the lack of light might bring lack of clarity. It didn't. He pressed the corner of it to his mouth instead, to try to muffle his moan of pain.

And then- Then. As though that hadn't been bad enough, he'd told him about Huaizui.

His desire to explain, for Mo Ran to understand, to somehow ameliorate the shame he had felt last night was the reason why he now felt it a thousand-fold.

He would have to give up his job. He would have to leave Sichuan. There was no way he could ever face Mo Ran again. He needed to walk into the mountains, dig a grave, lie down in it, and then pull the earth over himself.

Instead, he peeked out, and looked at the note again. *Shizun*. Mo Ran had even seen his silly, ridiculous novels! Now he was *teasing* him!

He had no face left. Nothing at all.

He had disgraced himself. He thought that he had managed to keep his feelings for Mo Ran under tight control, but all it took was a little kindness, a single moment of feeling as though Mo Ran thought he was something worth *protecting*, and he had spilled his shameful, revolting words like bile.

Mo Ran must be utterly disgusted. He must think he was the most pathetic idiot to walk the earth. He was so kind, to listen to Chu Wanning's *spewing* with a polite show of patience, but inside he must have been sickened by him. Perfectly understandably. Chu Wanning had forced his hideous past on him, like a monster. How depraved was he, that he was willing to demand pity in place of-

It had been *ugly* of him. *He* was ugly. Ugly inside, ugly outside. So ugly, so unlovable, so repulsive his own father had tried to erase him from the earth. How could Mo Ran ever look at Chu Wanning with anything the barest grain of respect again? Let alone affection, let alone-

He stopped himself. He never let himself think so far, even before this, this, this wretched morning of absolute obliteration.

His chest heaved, and his eyes prickled. Of course. Only one thing was needed for his dishonour to be truly complete, and his weak body would of course betray him to it. He pressed the duvet to his eyes, as though the tears weren't real if they didn't touch his cheeks.

The shadows lengthened on the sliver of floor that he could see. The light deepened, growing red and warm, and Chu Wanning couldn't move. Moving meant that he was alive, and if he was alive, he had to feel the shame and embarrassment like it was a stone in his throat.

There was a knock on the door.

A minute later, it repeated.

Then it turned into a hammering.

Chu Wanning sighed and went to open it. Police? Reports of an old man beating up one young one, and then molesting another all the way up to his flat. He didn't even feel anxiety over his imminent arrest; the only thing his head had room for was-

Mo Ran. Mo Ran, who sighed in relief when he saw him, and bestowed a dimpled grin like treasure from heaven.

"Ah, shizun! Thank fuck, I was so worried; you didn't e-mail back, so I couldn't stop thinking you'd passed out or your heart had exploded or something!"

Chu Wanning just stared at him. His jaw was clenched so tightly that his teeth ached. The urge to slam the door shut was almost overwhelming.

Mo Ran's smile was fading, "You still don't look well. Do you want me to call your doctor for you?"

Chu Wanning jerked his head from side to side, approximating a shake of negation.

“Right… Can I come in?”

He shook his head again. Mo Ran placed a hand on his hip and gave him a look of tolerant amusement.

“I see, we’re back to ‘it’s inappropriate’. That’s fine, I just needed to see that you were okay. I, um, got you these, in case you didn’t want to go out to the shops today.”

He held out a small cardboard box: pastel pink, with gold writing. Chu Wanning recognised the label of a bakery one street over.

“Why?” he managed to croak.

“Just… I feel bad.”

“For me?” Anger, hot and welcome, overrode the humiliation and disgrace for a moment. “Don’t bother.”

“For me – I mean, not *for* me. I felt bad that you were walking me home, and you got your phone and wallet stolen for your trouble.”

“I wasn’t walking you home,” Chu Wanning spat. “We just happened to be walking in the same direction at the same time.”

“Still,” Mo Ran said, unperturbed.

Chu Wanning looked at the box again, and he remembered. “How’s your hand?” he asked, in the same acidic tone.

Mo Ran had the gall to *laugh* at him. “Fine, it’ll be healed in a few days. Just taking some painkillers for it. I’ve done worse at the gym. Take the box.”

Chu Wanning snatched it, just so that Mo Ran would stop holding it out between them.

“Oh, and before I forget – Luo Xianxian dropped by the lab with your handkerchief.”

Chu Wanning snatched that too. “Fine.”

“And her dad’s a perfumer or something, she wanted to give you a sample of a haitang perfume he’s developed, because of the flower on- Wait, no, sorry, this one-”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Chu Wanning said, and took the small blue bottle as well.

He wished the glass would break in his clenched hand, and make him feel something other than the fire in his ears, the poison in his heart.

Why was Mo Ran so *tall*? It made his neck ache to look up at him.

“I should never have said all of that nonsense last night,” Chu Wanning said, speaking so quickly his tongue tripped over the words.

“It wasn’t nonsense.”

“It was. Nonsense that I should never have forced you to listen to. It was completely inappropriate of me to throw all of that on you. It’s unforgivable.”

“Only because there’s nothing to forgive. I’m glad you told me.”

“I shouldn’t have. It was completely unacceptable.”

“It really wasn’t. I’m grateful that you could trust me with it.”

Chu Wanning writhed. “I didn’t. It was rubbish. I was lying.”

Oh, that was- that was bad. He shouldn’t have said that.

Mo Ran’s smile softened. “Okay, shizun.” He then – the monster, the *fiend* – winked at him. “It never happened. Don’t worry.”

“I wasn’t!” he replied with a strangled voice. “I wasn’t worried!”

“Good.”

“Good!” Mo Ran’s dimples were back, so deep that Chu Wanning could fall into them. What was he playing at? Why wasn’t he disgusted? Or was he, and hiding it for some reason? *Why*?

“Just… go away, Mo Ran!” he said, and slammed the door shut.

*

Mo Ran was furious.

Not at Chu Wanning slamming the door. No. The only emotion that his little performance had engendered was a warm delight in how fucking cute it was.

He wasn't even angry that his e-mail had gone unanswered. Chu Wanning had looked so pitiful when he opened the door, eyes red and swollen, looking anywhere but at Mo Ran's face. He had never seen him so embarrassed. He had learnt to read Chu Wanning, he realised, and this was the most anxious he had ever seen him. Even… even more anxious than that day he had kissed Shi Mei.

That was why Mo Ran was so angry. He knew what Chu Wanning was, he *knew* it, and he was still falling into the shithead's trap. How was he so good at acting? What the fuck was he *doing*?

He couldn't sleep at night. Especially last night, with his hand hurting like it was being fucked and Chu Wanning's story bouncing around his brain like a fucking screensaver. He felt anger like an ulcer in the stomach, like a cancer in his bowels. He felt it like a physical pain. He'd never got headaches before, except from incense and scented candles, but now he never seemed to be without one.

He'd nearly handed Chu Wanning the wrong 5ml bottle – green with a black top, instead of blue with a gold. He'd eventually got it for 380 yuan from the creepy dealer outside the toilets in that club in Ya'an.

If those pieces of pondscum hadn't stolen his phone, he could have taken some incriminating photos last night instead – himself naked in Chu Wanning's bed, a selfie in the mirror. Even, depending on how deeply asleep Chu Wanning had been…

He didn't know why that thought made something in his chest twist.

Instead, he'd ransacked the place in the guise of tidying it. He had no idea what he might have found – he spent an hour going through all his fucking medicine cabinets alone – but Chu Wanning didn't even have condoms.

Mo Ran would be spending Lunar New Years with the Xues. After that… after that, he'd find a way. It was time to put an end to this.

Chapter 15: Much Faster, Much More Aggressive, Much More Painful

The end of January brought the beginning of spring, at least astronomically; the weather was still bitingly cold. More importantly, it brought the Lunar New Year. Wang Chuqing's parents were visiting from Baidicheng and bringing with them her uncle and a host of cousins. Xue Zhengyong's cousin was also attending with her family. Along with the Xues and Mo Ran, it was going to be a very full household.

"You know you're invited, Yuheng," Xue Zhengyong had said after the final meeting of the semester. "You're more than welcome."

"The Reunion Dinner is for family first and foremost, and you're going to have more than enough guests to deal with," Chu Wanning said. "You're really very kind, but I have plans." He smiled. "Though if you want to escape and recover at any point, let me know."

"Ahhh, you see right through me! Are you going to watch the Gala?" he asked, and laughed at the expression on Chu Wanning's face. "Joking, I'm joking!"

Xue Zhengyong had sent a gift to every single member of staff at Sisheng University, whether professor, office administrator, cook, cleaner, or security guard: a hamper of New Year's food with a selection of teas, red and gold *Fu* banners and hanging pendants, fold-out lanterns, and a Sisheng University mug and pen. Those with children received red envelopes with 88 yuan in them.

Chu Wanning's had also contained two bottles of Pear Blossom baijiu. They were the best possible gift he could have asked for, and so he managed to get through New Year's Eve and New Year's Day with a bottle and some microwave meals, watching the fireworks out of the window, and indulging in some hours spent playing the guqin.

Music allowed him to access his emotions more deeply. They usually eluded him, too bright and hard and painful to be put into words. Only when he slowed down, with his hands occupied and the music soothing him, could they become manageable enough to face.

Mo Ran… didn't seem to hate him, after everything he'd revealed about Huaizui. He had still come around the next day – with pastries! – to check that he was all right. Mo Ran cared whether he lived or died.

He'd never dared to hope for even that much. Could it be that Mo Ran actually considered them friends now? He had defended Chu Wanning, held him, helped him back to his flat. The separation by a few days from the mugging and its aftermath meant that Mo Ran's teasing with that ridiculous *shizun* of his now felt affectionate rather than mocking. It was like a nickname, but a nickname between just two of them. Wasn't that… a pet name?

He blushed furiously. *Don't be so idiotic, Wanning!* A nickname – a nickname was more than enough. He wouldn't be so self-indulgent as to allow himself to become straightforwardly delusional.

It was enough to get him through the New Year, which was always a painful, lonely time. Unable to concentrate on work, he spent it on reading, music, and exercise. Normally solitude was a balm for him, but during festivals it became an ordeal to be endured instead.

Well. Not long to go, now. Only another couple of weeks until the new semester started, and he planned to finish his paper on magnetoplasmadynamic thrusters to submit to JESTECH before then.

It was the third evening after New Year's, and Chu Wanning had barely covered the literature review when there was a knock on the door. It was usual for people to make visits to friends, to exchange gifts and wishes for the New Year, but he hadn't been expecting anyone.

Mo Ran, standing there with a net of tangerines and a wrapped present. "Happy New Year!"

"Mo Ran?" Chu Wanning peeked out of the door.

"It's just me. I couldn't bear the family for another night."

And he had come to Chu Wanning. His heart felt warm at the thought. It must have been difficult for Mo Ran, with so many family members he had only ever met as an adult – always the illegitimate child, discovered late. It must have brought a great deal of guilt and resentfulness and awkwardness on both sides, only exacerbated by the aggressively family-orientated nature of the holiday.

"I, um," he said, and considered his options. "I, er…"

"Don't worry, I know the flat is out of bounds," Mo Ran said with a grin. "I wondered if you fancied going out for dinner instead. I've missed our lunches."

Chu Wanning could feel the blood creeping up the sides of his neck. That… what would be all right, wouldn't it? After all, it was in public. They ate together in Mengpo Canteen...

Mo Ran was still looking down at him with a smile. He sighed theatrically. "Tell you what, I'm writing my Course 2 dissertation, and I wondered if you'd look over Chapter 1 for me. Make sure I'm on the right track." And he pulled out a sheath of papers from his bag.

Chu Wanning could barely look at him. It was so kind, so considerate – Mo Ran had clearly realised Chu Wanning's concern about work boundaries and provided him with a perfect reason. "Well, if it would be a work dinner…"

"Exactly. So. Please, save me from my family for a few hours."

"All right," Chu Wanning said, hiding a smile. "I just need to- give me two minutes?"

"Sure thing."

Chu Wanning shut the door, and immediately panicked. Socks! He needed new socks – he'd put some on that morning, but that wasn't enough! Clean socks – surely he had some clean socks in the place?!

He brushed his teeth, and as he did, he despaired over his hair. He dragged a brush through it so roughly it felt as though he'd lost half of it; he tied it in a loose ponytail at the base of his neck, which he felt looked less severe than his work bun.

A different hairstyle could only do so much. It was still the same thin, pale, bony, ugly face staring back at him.

He reminded himself that Mo Ran knew what he looked like, and could still tolerate his company. He had sought it out. He could have met any of his friends tonight if he needed a break from his family, and just like when he had asked him to be a supervisor, he had *chosen* Chu Wanning. That meant something.

It had been closer to five minutes by the time he emerged. He was wearing a pale blue jumper over a white shirt, with grey trousers and trainers (another agonising choice, but Mo Ran had also been wearing trainers, so he had decided that that was probably what the evening called for). He and Mo Ran spoke at the same time.

"I'm sorry I'm late-"

"Wow, that colour really suits-"

"Oh, sorry, I-"

"No, no, please-"

Mo Ran smiled at him. Chu Wanning tried to smile back. His face felt scorching hot. He looked down to hide it, and tied the belt of his coat extra tightly.

When he looked up again, Mo Ran was staring at it. He placed a hand in front of his stomach self-consciously. Had it rumbled?

“Um, if you have no preferences, I have an idea for where we can eat,” Mo Ran said.

“Please.” He gestured to the stairs. “It’s difficult; I presume lots of people want to eat out with friends, but lots of staff are still away visiting family.”

“Mn, exactly. I know a great place, and I checked it was open on the way. It’s busy, but the food’s amazing.”

It was nice, to let Mo Ran take the lead and responsibility for choosing the restaurant. Chu Wanning wouldn’t have trusted him to a few months ago, but Mo Ran had clearly paid attention to his preferences, and by the end of the semester Chu Wanning had enjoyed every meal he had selected.

But he seemed rather distracted. Unhappy, even.

“Has it been difficult?” Chu Wanning asked delicately. “With Wang Chuqing’s family?”

Mo Ran gave him a crooked smile. “They’re lovely, actually. My uncle’s cousin had loads of little remarks, though. Nothing ever really *bad*, you know, just…”

Chu Wanning nodded. “I know what you mean.”

Idiot! Of course he didn’t; being the child of an affair was an entirely different thing to being an orphan. He had never had to navigate the intricacies of a birth family, with all the expectations and family history that could make every conversation a minefield.

But just as he was about to apologise for his insensitivity, Mo Ran looped an arm through his. “I know you do,” he said. “It’s nice to be able to talk to someone about it, without them going on about how grateful I should be…”

Oh. Perhaps some good had come out of his humiliating story after all, if it gave Mo Ran some feeling of solidarity and comfort.

More than that, he was walking arm in arm with Mo Ran.

“Yes… That line between gratitude and obligation can be a difficult one.”

He was walking arm in arm with Mo Ran.

Mo Ran hummed in agreement. “Yes, exactly… And when kindness comes with strings attached, or is thrown back in your face. ‘You need to do this thing, because I’ve fed and clothed you.’”

He was walking arm in arm with Mo Ran.

More than that, Mo Ran was articulating what, in the guilty depths of his heart, he had thought as well. “Unfilial…” he whispered, unable to voice his thoughts any further.

With Mo Ran (walking arm in arm), he apparently didn’t need to. “Yeah. Yeah, exactly. I mean, the Xues are amazing. Xue Meng excepted. I can’t believe how lucky I am. It’s not like you and that bastard…”

Chu Wanning suddenly felt the mountains' winter chill, and unconsciously pressed closer to Mo Ran’s side. “It’s different… I don’t have to see him. He didn’t have any family either, so…”

“So, you’ve been completely on your own? All New Year?”

He looked away, embarrassed by his friendlessness. “Mn.”

“Well,” Mo Ran said, and squeezed his arm. “Not anymore.”

*

Ni’er’s was full, but Mo Ran managed to find a table for two in a corner near the toilets. Chu Wanning wrinkled his nose in distaste, but didn’t complain; apparently it was worth being out of the main press of bodies.

He didn’t know why he was so thrown by Chu Wanning wearing that powder blue jumper. The boy in Linyi had worn a coat of the same colour, a coat that Mo Ran had treasured until it was destroyed in the fire. That was all, he told himself. It was the colour that tugged at his heart, not Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning was a cunning, predatory man. Chu Wanning had hurt Shi Mei.

This is what he told himself, as he bought the sweet and salty dishes he knew that Chu Wanning would prefer. All the specials were fish, in honour of the New Year, and Mo Ran ordered sweet and sour crucian carp.

“Are you mad? We’ll never finish it!”

“I will, it’s good protein. And it’s good luck!”

The word for ‘fish’ was a homophone for the word for ‘surplus’, and the first character of ‘crucian carp’ sounded like the one meaning ‘good luck’. Mo Ran knew that appealing to Chu Wanning’s appreciation of such traditions would work, and Chu Wanning did indeed acquiesce very quickly. He was such a strange mix of the old and the new – so scientific and logical, but also so respectful of old customs.

Chu Wanning didn’t like beer, so they ordered a bottle of western wine instead. Chu Wanning insisted on reading through Mo Ran’s chapter, bringing a pen out of his shirt pocket to mark it properly.

How was it possible that Mo Ran thought this guy was irresistible? He was absolutely fucking deranged. It was like Chu Wanning was so absolutely and perfectly unsexy that he came right back around to sexy again? It should have been like an icy shower, and instead Mo Ran was thinking about how close the clip of the cap was to Chu Wanning's nipple.

"It's good," Chu Wanning said after a painful ten minutes. "I've written down a few comments, but the structure is sound."

"That's good," Mo Ran said, finishing his wine and topping up the glasses. "I'll look over it when I get home, but… Please, no more engineering."

"Oh. Um. All right." Chu Wanning was visibly searching his brain for a topic.

"What made you get into tai chi?"

"Ah. The doctors recommended it. When I was…"

"In hospital?"

"Mn. Sort of – a few months after. Well, they actually said that I couldn't fence anymore, and it was Rong Yan who suggested qigong."

"Fencing? You were a fencer?"

"Yes; I started as an undergraduate, when I was at Oxford. Too many films. I fenced sabre – jundao," he added in translation.

Mo Ran could easily imagine Chu Wanning in one of those tight white outfits (*too* easily, down, boy), but not wielding a *dao*. All of the swords in his flat had been thin, straight *jians*.

“A dao, like…?” He made a gesture, sketching out a wide curved blade.

“No, no, it’s different to a Chinese one. Very, very thin – like on the television, in the Olympics. There are three swords, with different hilts. The sabre blade is slightly thicker, but only by a millimetre or two. No, the difference is in the hilts, and the scoring.”

Mo Ran picked out a couple of the choicest pieces of meat and placed them in Chu Wanning’s bowl. “Go on. I don’t know about Western fencing – how is the scoring different?”

Chu Wanning still looked wary, worried about boring his dining companion. “Well… Most people start with the foil. You score with the tip anywhere in this rectangle here…” He drew a rectangle that enclosed his torso.

His long, thin torso.

Oblivious to Mo Ran’s lingering eyes, he continued. “Then there’s the épée. That scores with the tip of the blade anywhere on the body. Sabre scores with any part of the blade anywhere above the waist.”

Mo Ran nodded to show that he was following. “So, why did you pick sabre?”

“Huaizui wanted me to choose foil. It looks more refined… From what I’d seen, 90% of any bout was spent arguing over the right of way and who had officially scored first. It’s very strict and very technical, but I had enough of that in my work. I didn’t need it in fencing as well. Épée is more passive, more duplicitous – with an épée, especially if you’re tall with a long reach, you can passively hold off an attack, all defence. There’s no target area and no right of way, so it’s all about waiting for a gap to take advantage of.”

He ate, and as he chewed, Mo Ran noticed that he was wearing a small smile. “Whereas sabre… Because you can score with any part of the blade, the movement is different. Whipping, even thrashing, instead of poking and stabbing. I’ve heard it said that sabreurs are the Neanderthals of fencing, but… It’s much faster, much more aggressive, and much more

painful. That's why the sabre mask is different, more solid. You end up with a lot of welts, all over your arms and back and shoulders."

Was Chu Wanning doing this deliberately, the *whore*? *Much faster, much more aggressive, much more painful*. And wearing that slutty little smile at the thought!

All Mo Ran could think about were those words, and the idea of fucking Chu Wanning like a sabre fencer, and Chu Wanning *loving it*, wanting it faster, wanting it more aggressive, wanting it *painful*. Slamming into Chu Wanning with all of the force he could muster – he had never been able to do that with a lover before, they had always seemed so delicate, so soft – but Chu Wanning would take it, take all of it, and demand more, muscled flesh marked with bruises and-

Welts. *Welts!*

Under the table he was as hard as a rock. He was *agonisingly* erect. Chu Wanning had segued into some discussion about the scoring system and something about jackets and electric wires, which in Mo Ran's mind, insane with horniness, was only making things worse.

Chu Wanning trailed off, realising that he was becoming more technical and that Mo Ran was barely listening. "Ah… I'm sorry, I was going on."

"No, no, it's fine!" Mo Ran said, and gave a desperate smile. "I didn't want to interrupt, it's so interesting. I'm just sad that you can't do it anymore…"

"I might be able to. You're right, I did enjoy it – I should ask my doctor again. Perhaps a foil would be better now, but I would miss the sabre. Foil would feel… tame in comparison."

Chu Wanning, have mercy on me.

He was continuing with intoxicating innocence. "But Rong Yan suggested qigong when I came out of the hospital, and I love that as well. A lot of fencers will do an additional martial

art or form of exercise, so tai chi would work very nicely alongside. It takes more strength than you'd think, but it's not as much strain on the heart."

The bottle in his pocket felt like it weighed a tonne. He felt certain that everyone in the restaurant was aware of its presence, knew what he was and what he was planning.

But they didn't understand. They didn't know Shi Mei, how vulnerable and kind he was. They didn't know Chu Wanning. It might seem like he was speaking with oblivious enthusiasm about swords and tai chi, but they didn't know what Mo Ran knew. That he was perverse, that he was… was…

"Urgh, it's only eight. I want another drink," he said, as the waiter took away their plates. "Fancy a cocktail?"

Chapter 16: In Vino Veritas

Chapter Notes

▶ This chapter contains drink-spiking and sexual assault including kissing and touching over clothes. Detailed spoilers HERE:

Two doors down from *Ni'er's* was the *Sichuan Whisky Bar*. Chu Wanning approved of this name, expecting it to have a very clear and easily navigable drinks selection, but he was betrayed by the two blackboards behind the bar with an incredible number of cocktails.

Mo Ran made a beeline for the bar. The music was loud and dissonant, but as it was so early in the evening it was practically empty. *One drink*, Chu Wanning thought. He had absolutely no intention of staying here once it began to fill up.

“There’s so many options…” He looked at the board, trying to parse the ingredients. He hadn’t drunk a cocktail in years. “I’ll go to the bathroom, and decide when I come back.”

“We don’t want to make the bartender wait,” Mo Ran said. “Tell you what, I’ll buy us both a Chivas and green tea to start with, and then you can have a look if you want a second.”

Chu Wanning wrinkled his nose. “Too bitter.”

“I’ll ask the bartender to sweeten it. They’ll have some syrup or a liqueur or something.”

“Mn.”

Mo Ran took this as acquiescence, and waved to the bartender.

“Don’t wave! He’ll come to us when he’s ready.”

“You’ll be waiting all night. Go, you can get the next round.”

Chu Wanning hadn’t been out for nearly a year, since Xue Zhengyong had dragged him and the other Heads of Department to a karaoke bar. He still shuddered to remember that night. Bars were loud, crowded places, full of blaring music and flashing lights. If he had drunk enough they become just about tolerable, but they always made him feel slightly sad. They reminded him of the first time he had drunk, in the complete opposite of a nightclub. He and Rong Yan had been in Paris for ICHEP – the International Conference for High Energy Physics – she on a panel on spectroscopy and neutrino physics, and he presenting a paper and a poster on antihydrogen applications of particle trapping. They had shared a bottle of white wine in a small restaurant with bright red awnings a few minutes’ walk from the Palais des Congrès, talking about the conference and France and-

And he would never see Rong Yan again, and he would never go to Paris again. He would never be allowed to leave the country again. But this was not the night to think about it, or the night to be melancholy.

Mo Ran had sought out his company, and even after their dinner (including Chu Wanning’s atrocious lapse in manners and self-control when he had bored his tolerant companion with a lecture about fencing, of all things) he still wanted them to have a drink together.

That was what was important. That was what he would never have had the courage to even dream of when he woke up that afternoon.

After using the toilet he went to the sinks, and checked for witnesses. Neither of them had eaten anything too pungent – only a little garlic on the fish – but they would have to stand close to each other to talk over the music, and Chu Wanning was already anxious about it. He checked his teeth for detritus, and then brushed his teeth with his finger and the small travel sized toothpaste in his pocket.

This wasn’t a date! There was no reason to be more nervous tonight than any day he spent with Mo Ran in the lab. But it *felt* different; Mo Ran had chosen his company, and Chu Wanning didn’t want to do anything to make him regret that decision. He knew that he would end up doing *something* irritating or temperamental or precious or arrogant, and he couldn’t

predict that that thing would be, but he could at least cover his bases with hygiene. It was bad enough that his face and personality were repulsive; he didn't need his breath to be as well.

When he came back, Mo Ran was talking to the bartender, a few spaces beyond their two drinks. He had taken off his jacket, and the way he was leaning across the counter made the sleeve of his black t-shirt strain across his bicep. His skin was immaculate, perfectly golden, and… and he was grinning at the bartender, a young man in his early twenties.

Chu Wanning felt a flush of embarrassment and shame. How deluded was he?! Brushing his teeth in a bar toilet, like some- some- He couldn't even think of the word; he kept coming up with old-fashioned terms like "harlot" or "concubine", which made him feel even more idiotic and wrong-footed.

He wanted to run. He'd pay Mo Ran for the drinks, but then he'd leave – make up some excuse. He should never have come here. Everyone must be looking at him, a ridiculous old creep wearing a shirt and a jumper in a nightclub, like a demented grandfather who'd escaped into the night.

He hurriedly put a fifty yuan note by the drinks; he'd e-mail an apology later. He just needed to get *out*, before someone noticed him and arrested him for being such a pervert, *looking* at young men – or worse, laughed at him.

Unfortunately, he wasn't fast enough; Mo Ran caught sight of him. "Ah, there you are!"

He turned that beautiful smile on Chu Wanning, who froze like a deer in the headlights.

Mo Ran caught sight of the green note. "Wait… you were leaving?"

Chu Wanning stared at the floor. He felt hyper-aware of the bartender watching them; probably wondering why someone as tall and handsome and charming as Mo Ran was wasting his time even talking to someone like Chu Wanning.

Hyper-aware, too, of his monotonous voice – already used far, far too much this evening, despite Mo Ran's polite denials. He swallowed painfully. "Mn."

"If the music's too loud, we can find somewhere else. Or- urgh, are the toilets gross?"

He tightly shook his head. "They're fine."

Mo Ran's smile was somewhat strained. Of course. Chu Wanning was now embarrassing *him* as well.

"Take your money, then, and if you don't like this one we can buy another."

Trapped, he had no choice but to nod. "Which one's mine?"

"This one has the syrup in it."

The syrup cut through the burn of the Scotch, neutralising his usual complaint about Chivas and green tea. It was surprising refreshing – despite the January temperatures outside, the bar was warm. Chu Wanning felt himself began to relax again, infinitesimally.

Mo Ran was watching for his reaction to the cocktail. "How does it taste?"

"Mn. All right. Not too bitter," he said.

"Good. Good…"

Mo Ran seemed nervous, somehow. Chu Wanning knew that this was his fault, he was the one who had been about to bolt with no explanation, so he let Mo Ran lead them to a small table in an alcove.

“Has Xue Meng been in contact with you?”

“Oh, yeah,” Mo Ran said, and took out his new phone to show him how many text messages Xue Meng had been sending him, apparently not caring how many answers he was receiving.

“He’s been sending me about two e-mails a day. It’s the second bout tomorrow. I think he was slightly disappointed with his score in the first one.”

“He sent me a string of absolute unrepeatable insults about Mei Hanxue, so I think you’re right. But hey, we agreed no more engineering talk.”

“All right…” Chu Wanning sipped his drink again to cover his uncertainty as to a suitable topic. “Um…”

“Shi Mei’s doing well. He asked me to pass on a ‘Happy New Year’ to you. He was sorry he couldn’t visit.”

“Ah, um. Yes. The same to him, of course…” Why was this bar so hot? At least his drink had ice cubes in it.

“Apparently Hua Binan’s been working him like a donkey.”

“He was always a hard worker.” Chu Wanning disliked talking about people, but he needed to talk about *something*, and it wasn’t so bad if he only said complimentary things, right? “It’s a shame he went to Guyueye. He could be applying his talents in far better places.”

“I mean, Guyueye’s pretty prestigious. He must be making bank.”

“Hmm.” Chu Wanning drank. “Oh, no doubt. But how did they first gain their money? By experimenting on mothers and children without full information, without full consent, and with no renumeration. Worse, with no compensation when so many of those children developed osteoporosis before the age of ten. That kind of genetic research, done without *any* consideration of risk or agency or ethics – that’s how they started, Mo Ran. That’s how they made their first billions. So what if a handful of people now have Butterfly-Bone Syndrome – let alone how many might carry the altered genes without even knowing it! – if so many other treatments have since been developed? Yes, Guyueye made so, *so* much money, but aren’t they *helping people*?”

He was shocked out of his own sermon but how ugly his voice sounded, how bitter and sarcastic. The ice cubes at the bottom of his glass tinkled, and he realised that he had done it again. Was he so incapable of normal conversation without turning it into a lecture? Was he so completely unsocialised? Yes, obviously. He was a feral academic, not a real person any more.

Even Mo Ran seemed to have finally grown tired of his dullness; there was a visible strain on his face, for all that he tried to keep his voice light. “So, none of your students should work for Guyueye or Rufeng. Got it. Which one’s worse?”

Chu Wanning shrugged. There was a ring of condensation on the table; it shimmered like an errant halo, reflecting the neon lights above the bar. “Rufeng itself is fine. It’s its President, Nangong Liu.”

“Hasn’t he left? I thought he was running for Mayor of Shanghai?”

“He *what?*”

The scream, the thud, the crack, the sirens-

No. No, he couldn’t think of that tonight. They hadn’t drunk much, but it had gone to his head (probably the effect of a week’s worth of one microwave meal a day). Bad enough that he had inflicted the story of Huaizui on Mo Ran before. He could *not* think about Nangong Liu.

Nor could he think about Mo Ran. Mo Ran sitting with blue and purple light sketching out the lines of his face, sparkling in his eyes.

It sent a lava-hot chill all over him. That didn't make sense. But that was what it felt like – icy heat, terrified warmth. He tried to take another draught, but found that there was only meltwater in his glass.

"Let me get you another one," Mo Ran said. "It's really hot in here."

"Mm. Yes, very hot," Chu Wanning said, and felt a sick wash of shame. "The bar! I mean the bar is hot!"

Mo Ran grinned at him, and it made Chu Wanning want to flee. It was overwhelming, to be the recipient of a smile so blindingly beautiful. It made his stomach churn, and the bile rise like acid in the back of his throat. He was so thirsty. Even if this one wasn't sweet, he needed anything liquid.

He had to relax. *Relax*… Usually his anguished orders to himself to relax just made him more anxious, but perhaps he was gaining more self-control over his emotions, because after the flush of heat and nausea, he was beginning to feel… Slow. Yes.

What a relief it was, for the world to be slow. Just a little softer, a little more forgiving. Like Mo Ran, sitting down beside him with two full glasses of cool liquid.

It flowed down his throat like the spiritual essence of water, clean and sweet. An ice cube bumped against his lips, and the sensation was fascinating. He set his glass down on the table – very slowly, very carefully – and took it out. He rubbed it over his lips again, trying to understand the impression. Pleasurable, but also set at a right angle to pain.

Cold. Cold, when everything else was hot, when Mo Ran was radiating a perceptible heat next to him. Careless of how it dripped, Chu Wanning pressed it to his neck, leaning his head back so he could hold the captured, waning ice between his palm and his throat.

There was a *growl* beside him, and someone grabbed his wrist; Chu Wanning startled back to sight. The sight of Mo Ran, looking *furious.* The lights of the bar set violet glints in his eyes, made his artless shock of thick hair shine blue-black.

He pulled Chu Wanning up, and Chu Wanning followed, boneless and fluid. He seemed to have too many legs, at least twice the normal number of feet, and they kept tripping him up. He was aware of nothing so much as Mo Ran's hand around his wrist, hot and strong and inescapable.

Something hard rang against the back of his head; something rough scraped across his palm. The solidness of a wall at his back, and the solidness of muscle pressing all down his front. It made him jump, made him panic – another press against a surface, another hand where he never touched, another alien mouth against his own. He felt the same terror, but something new as well, something different. A thirst. They were too close, much too close, but also not close enough.

He was half aware of the man kissing him, the hunger in his mouth, the lip-bruising force that wouldn't even let him breathe. Chu Wanning was shaking like a fly-stung horse. He didn't know what to *do* - what did he do? He pressed his lips together and tried to turn his head.

He had always had trouble with recognising peoples' faces, a slight degree of prosopagnosia, and for a sickening, terrifying second, he didn't know the person in front of him. It wasn't Mo Ran; Mo Ran had never pinned this violent, hungry gaze on him. Then they spun, and the light changed again, and there was Mo Ran again, but so close, so close it made Chu Wanning's head spin.

"Mo Ran? Is that you?"

Mo Ran shoved him back against the wall, and Chu Wanning cried out in protest as his head bounced off the brickwork.

"Who else would it be? Huh? Who else do you think I'd be? Shi Mei?"

"Shi *Mei*…?"

Mo Ran answered with another kiss, this time forcing his tongue in between Chu Wanning's lips. He groaned, and arched his back to press himself along Mo Ran's body.

Something… something was wrong. He couldn't… he couldn't place what had happened. He couldn't remember…

All he knew was that he could taste Mo Ran, he could feel the firmness and heat of his body, and that was… that was wrong. That wasn't his to feel.

"Wait- Mo Ran, wait-" He didn't… What has happening? Flakes of snow were falling from the sky, exploding like fireworks against his skin. He was staggering, and then there was another wall, another kiss. "What are you *doing*?"

"Exactly what you want," was the low reply, hot against his ear, and fear jolted down his spine.

Mo Ran knew. Chu Wanning's most closely-guarded, shameful, disgusting secret, and Mo Ran *knew it*.

He couldn't hear over the pounding of his heart. The world was slipping and sliding around them in a way that made him think of the engineering lubricant they used in the lab. The *lab!*

"Mo Ran, you- you can't," he said, and surprised himself when the word came out with a moan. "We can't. I'm your *teacher*…"

"That's never stopped you before, has it?"

"No," he said, trying and failing to push Mo Ran away. "No, I'm… You're my, I'm…" The pavement was wet. The air was wet. Chu Wanning's legs had turned into noodles beneath

him, folding, slithering. “Please- Please, please stop, I don’t… I don’t know what’s happening…”

“Wanning...? What- What are you doing?"

Another jolt, another road, another sky. Now he was face down, cheek pressed to the freezing tarmac.

"What the- what the fuck have I done? Shit, what the fuck have I *done*?”

A voice from high above him, so distressed it tore his chest in two. It hurt.

It was Mo Ran. Mo Ran was in trouble. He needed to pull himself together. He needed- He needed to stand. Needed to stand up.

“I’m sorry, please, I’m so sorry- Sh-Shizun? It's me, it's- it's Mo Ran. Shizun, *please*- Shit, shit- *shit!”*

“Teacher,” he managed to gasp, but he didn’t even know if Mo Ran was there any more. *Someone* was, someone was holding onto his arm. “No!”

“Wanning, Chu-*laoshi*, shizun, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so- please, please just stand up for me, yeah? You can- you can stand up-“

“I, I don’t know what’s happening to me,” he sobbed. Something terrible was going on, he was sure – an impression confirmed by Mo Ran’s tear-stained face, cloud-wreathed, looking down at where he lay in the road.

Someone had been kissing him. Someone had touched him; he could feel it, every nerve-ending depressed and awash with fire. He only knew it was important that Mo Ran… Mo

Ran deserved better. That's what he was certain of. That's all he knew. He needed to ensure that Mo Ran was… Was…

He was going to be sick. He was going to be sick, but he didn't even have the strength to turn over. The nauseating slip and spin was turning into a creeping darkness; he was being dragged into the void, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop it. He was helpless to save himself, and helpless to protect Mo Ran from whatever terrible, hideous thing he'd been so sure he needed to protect him from.

"I'm going to get you home, okay? You're going to be just fine. My flat's right here, just- just a few more steps. Shizun, please, please, stay awake just for a second, please, please, I'm so sorry."

The sky changed to white. He was walking without using his legs; he was moving, but the lights were too bright. He was floating high, but the world refused to stay still. "I'm sorry…" he whispered, and the syllables reverberated in his head. "Mo Ran, I'm sorry…"

"*Don't-!* Don't. Don't. It's okay. You'll be okay."

Chapter 17: Deserving Ten Thousand Deaths

Chu Wanning came back to consciousness slowly, like a ship sinking in reverse, kind darkness pouring out of him. What replaced it was pain: skull-splitting pain in his head, scorched pain in his throat, muscle-twisting aches in his limbs.

He tried to crack open his eyes, but the light was *wrong*, too bright and too yellow to be his bedroom, with its black-out blinds. The unfamiliar room immediately began to spin, and his stomach clenched, his throat spasmed, he jerked-

"Hey, hey, it's all right-" Someone was helping him up, sweeping his hair back and holding a bucket in front of him just in time; he vomited until there was nothing left in him, his face covered with sweat and tears.

The liquid he threw up was strange: translucent, oily, bright green. It looked like washing-up liquid.

A broad hand was cradling the back of his head, easing it back onto the black pillow. Black? He blinked, clearing the tears of exertion from his eyes, and saw Mo Ran looking down at him.

He looked as bad as Chu Wanning felt. He was pale, and his pallidity turned his usual golden skin to something with the colour and dull sheen of beeswax. His hair was greasy and unwashed, sticking up at odd angles as though he'd been tugging at it. His eyes were red and swollen, and there were dried salt-tracks down his face, already being overcoated by fresh tears falling.

"What happened…?" Chu Wanning croaked. His throat was burnt by acid, swollen and hoarse from something.

Mo Ran didn't answer for a second. Instead, he very gently cleaned the sweat and spit from Chu Wanning's face with a cool wipe. It was the most heavenly thing Chu Wanning had ever felt.

“What do you remember?”

Chu Wanning tried to think back, and the question made him afraid. What did he *remember*? And yet Mo Ran was right to ask it, for he had no memory of where he was or what had happened.

The fear he felt was so physical he gagged again; his abdominal muscles ached, but there was nothing more to throw up. “I… I…”

Think, idiot. Disgusting, filthy, useless idiot. “I… We… We went for dinner. You came around, and… You had your Course 2 chapter…”

Mo Ran was sitting on a kitchen chair, pulled up close to the bed. What bed was he in? Whose?

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right. We finished early, and we went for a drink…”

“Mn. Next door? We…” He remembered the darkness, the loud music, the neon lights. “We had… Chivas and tea? I think? But then I…”

How much had he drunk? Shame washed over him; he groaned, and then felt the overwhelming shame of that as well. He had never been so drunk before – he had never blacked out, never lost consciousness, and for him to do that in front of *Mo Ran*-

What had he said? What had he *done*?

He remembered terror. He remembered that he felt the need to protect Mo Ran. That he deserved better. That was all. He only felt the ghosts of the emotions; there was nothing else he could remember at all. It was a void.

He had never been so drunk as to have experienced that total loss of self-control and inhibition, but he knew that he must have told Mo Ran. He must have confessed. That was why he looked so terrible, so stricken.

His life was over.

"I…" His teeth began to chatter; he tried to clench his jaw shut, but there was a sharp pain in his molars, as though he'd already done so. "Mo Ran, I'm… I'm am… I've never- I've never been so drunk, I don't know- I'm so-"

"No, no, no, no," Mo Ran said, and then *took his hand*. He held it, tightly, in between both of his own. "You weren't drunk. We shared a bottle of western wine in the restaurant, and then you only had two drinks. You- Your drink was spiked, Chu-*laoshi*."

Chu-laoshi. He didn't realise how much he would regret the loss of that silly, teasing nickname. That was his first thought, while the rest of his brain tried to catch up.

"Spiked?" He knew the word *jia*, of course, but he was just too tired to understand what it meant in this context. "Does that mean… He made it too strong?"

"No." Mo Ran's eyes were full of tears again. "Someone… someone put a drug in your drink."

Of course. They warned students about it, on posters around the university. People who spiked drinks at parties, to rob their victim…

Or to rape them.

He exhaled a shuddering breath. He thought of the bartender; he remembered thinking how beautiful Mo Ran had looked, how charming his smile had been.

Someone had tried to drug Mo Ran. For the second time in a handful of days, they had tried to rob him, or to-

To-

He couldn't bear the thought of it. He tried to push himself up, but his body felt like a dishcloth that had had all the strength wrung out of it.

"But you're all right? They didn't get your drink too?"

"What?" Mo Ran was looking at him like he'd grown a second head. "What- No, no, it was *your* drink."

"I know, but we had the same… They were on the counter. They were both on the counter. They must have been trying to drug you, and got the wrong one."

Mo Ran blinked at him. "Chu-*laoshi*, I don't… It was *you*. They targeted *you*."

"Don't be so silly, Mo Ran. Who on earth would want to drug *my* drink?" Chu Wanning didn't even entertain the thought; it was ludicrous. "But… But I don't *remember*-"

Unless someone had wanted him to have an overdose. Wanted a scandal? Wanted...? His head hurt too much to think.

"What did I say?" He closed his eyes against the onslaught, and hoped that his heart would give out as a final mercy. "What… what did I *do*? Mo Ran, what did I-"

"No, no, you don't need to- You just said that you were tired. And then you couldn't speak. I got you out, but your legs weren't…. Chu-*laoshi,* you had a seizure."

A seizure – that would explain why his muscles ached so much, and why he could feel bruises on his face, a lump on the back of his head. Mo Ran was crying again now. It made him look so young. It must have been terrifying for him.

“You were seizing, in the road, and I- You-“ He looked away. “I should have brought you to the hospital.”

“No.”

“That’s what you said. You said not to bring you, and I shouldn’t have listened to you-“

“No, no, Mo Ran, listen to me. Please listen to me.” He licked his lips; it was so hard to talk, but Mo Ran needed to hear this. He couldn’t bear the self-recrimination on Mo Ran’s face. “If we’d gone to the hospital, by now it’d be in the papers that it was a drug overdose.”

“But you *didn’t*-“

“That doesn’t matter. Who did it – doesn’t matter. They’d say I was in hospital after ingesting drugs in a bar. I’d probably be arrested.” He tried to squeeze Mo Ran’s hand. “Thank you. Thank you for listening.”

Mo Ran wrenched his hand away and stood up; the chair fell backwards with a clatter. “Stop it! Just fucking stop it!”

Chu Wanning looked up at him in shock and horror. Was it because he squeezed Mo Ran’s hand? “I’m sorry, Mo Ran, I- *Did* I do something last night, did I say something to you-?”

“No! *You* did nothing! You-“ Mo Ran’s breath hitched, so violently and painfully that Chu Wanning could feel an empathetic ghost of a blockage behind his own sternum. “Just stop being so fucking *kind*!”

Chu Wanning had had a lot of accusations thrown at him in his time, but that had never been one of them. “What?”

“Some fucking, piece of shit, evil, shithead bastard spiked your drink, and you’re thanking me! Thanking me for not bringing you to the hospital, because they’d blame you for it! For someone doing that to you, for someone trying to-”

He collapsed onto the floor, and *sobbed* into his hands. Chu Wanning had never seen him like this; it made him feel sick with pain.

“Mo Ran, you saved my life-”

“Shut up! Just shut up!”

“No, I won’t. I threw up bile, when I woke up. So I’d already vomited. A lot. If I were on my own, I’d have choked. You stayed up all night and looked after me-”

“Why won’t you *shut the fuck up?!*” Mo Ran shouted at him. He scrambled to his feet. “For once in your fucking life, why can’t you just stop talking?! I don’t want to fucking hear it!”

He stalked out, and slammed the door behind him.

Chu Wanning couldn’t have spoken if he wanted to. Mo Ran’s words were like a garrotte around his throat. He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t *breathe*.

He could hear Mo Ran in the next room, pacing back and forth. Crying. Something smashed, and Chu Wanning’s muscles spasmed in protest when he jumped.

He was in Mo Ran’s room. In Mo Ran’s bed. He was certain of it. The expensive black duvet cover, the small stack of weights in one corner, the neat folders of work, the whiteboard with the dissertation plan on it.

He had taken Chu Wanning back to his own flat, to his own bed, because Chu Wanning had asked him not to take him to the hospital. He had placed that burden on the shoulders of a 24-year-old instead, who had stayed up all night making sure he didn't asphyxiate on his own vomit. And then he had repaid him by upsetting him to the point of tears.

Mo Ran was right. Why couldn't Chu Wanning just shut up? Why did he always have to make everything so much worse?

Why couldn't he stop himself from making everyone hate him so much?

Because when he talked, he revealed himself. And when they could see what he kept inside, even the first, smallest glimpse of it, loathing was the only option.

He couldn't even blame them. It was logical to be disgusted by the disgusting. It was logical to hate the hateful.

If he could have walked, he would have found the fire stairs, climbed to the stop of the building, and thrown himself off the roof.

There was an electric alarm clock on the bedside table. Its bright blue numbers read 14:56. Chu Wanning only used his phone as an alarm, because he couldn't sleep if there was so much as a single LED in his bedroom. But now he watched as the minutes ticked by, watching them split and shimmer and dance, not bothering to wipe the tears away.

*

Mo Ran wanted nothing more than to leave his flat and never return. He never wanted to see Chu Wanning again. He never wanted to hear him *apologise* or *thank* him. He never wanted to have to remember him seizing on the icy pavement, eyes rolled back in his head, loose black hair trailing in a dirty puddle, hands like claws, cheek scraped open on the tarmac.

He never wanted to remember the way his mouth had tasted, or the way he moaned. The way he instinctively arched against Mo Ran's body, pressing up to him, even as he'd told him to stop, reminded him that he was his teacher.

He never wanted to think about how close he'd come to doing something truly, desperately, unforgivably wrong. He never wanted to confront the fact that if Chu Wanning's legs hadn't buckled, if he hadn't started to shake… Mo Ran didn't know if he'd have been able to stop himself.

He had never hated anyone as much as he did himself, sitting vigil through the longest night of his life. Even the night his mother had died had been less confusing and less painful, because Mo Ran hadn't been the one to blame for it.

Even if what Shi Mei had said was true – and it *was*, of course it was true, because otherwise that would mean that Shi Mei had lied, and that hadn't happened, so it obviously was true – Mo Ran was now as bad as Chu Wanning. He had planned to seduce someone-

No. Seduction had gone out of the window when Chu Wanning had traced that fucking ice cube down his throat. There had been no clever, *stupid* little plans of charm and seduction left. There had only been *want* and *need* and Mo Ran's strength and Chu Wanning's artificial weakness, and all morality and self-righteousness were utterly forgotten.

He'd been going to force Chu Wanning. Right there, in an alleyway in Wuchang, just like the other filthy, disgusting bastards had threatened to in the hate mail they'd sorted and stickered together.

He wanted to cry, but his head was already hurting. He'd cried so much he'd dehydrated himself. He poured a glass of water and managed to gulp it down without throwing it at the wall in fury.

Then he realised that Chu Wanning had been throwing up. Throwing up, too weak to get to the bathroom, and however dehydrated *Mo Ran* was-

He poured another glass, hands shaking in his rush, and carried it through to the bedroom. Chu Wanning was curled on his side, eyes fixed on the clock that read 16:12.

His victim.

“Hey, I’m- I’m so sorry,” he said, spilling some of the water over his hand in his haste.

Chu Wanning just… looked at him.

“I, I thought you’d want something to drink, I should have brought it in earlier, I was- It was stupid, I didn’t think…”

Chu Wanning stared. There was a dark, damp patch on the pillow, but Chu Wanning’s eyes were dry and… blank. Blank.

“Please… please say something?”

Chu Wanning looked at him in silence.

Guilt clawed his guts open. Mo Ran was surprised they didn’t slither out in a pile on the floor. It would have been less painful if they had. “I shouldn’t have said that. That was a horrible thing to say. After all this, everything you- And then I said that.”

Chu Wanning looked away.

“I… you can talk. Please. It was a shitty, stupid thing to say. You can talk. Please.”

Chu Wanning shook his head.

“You… won’t?”

Another shake.

“You…” He frowned in thought. “You… can’t?”

A pause. Then a single nod. Chu Wanning curled up even tighter, unable to meet his eyes.

“Okay. Okay,” Mo Ran said, trying to think this through. “Shit, I just can’t stop fucking up, can I?”

Chu Wanning’s eyes darted up; he was frowning. He couldn’t *speak?* Mo Ran thought it didn’t make any sense, but he remembered Chu Wanning’s disconnected words the night before, sometimes coming out at random, late or jumbled. Single words, on their own. Was that not just an effect of that fucking drug?

He thought of Chu Wanning’s perfect, crisp enunciation in his lectures. His cold, monotonous voice. How often a single ‘Mn’ was the only response he’d give to a question.

That could wait. Mo Ran’s guilt and crimes and sins could wait. Chu Wanning needed to drink water. Right now, that was all that mattered.

“Can I…?” he asked (a bit fucking late to be asking for permission now), and slid his hand under the back of Chu Wanning’s head. He felt a lump under his fingers, and wanted to die when he remembered shoving him against the brick wall, the blind fury he’d felt when Chu Wanning had seemed to be unable to recognise him.

“Who else would it be? Huh? Who else do you think I’d be? Shi Mei?”

It had been jealousy as much as it had been righteousness.

No. Water.

He lifted Chu Wanning's head, and held the glass to his lips. Chu Wanning tried to sit up on his own, and the duvet fell down.

The powder blue jumper was filthy. One of the elbows was torn open, and there were stains of oil and dirt and water from the road. Down the front of it was dried vomit.

When Chu Wanning saw this he panicked. He tried to move the glass away from his lips, and he made a sudden, harsh noise, like an animal in pain.

He froze, and looked up at Mo Ran. His eyes were wide.

Mo Ran didn't know how to read it. "Okay, okay, I got it. Let me- I'll help you get this off and I'll wash it, yeah? I just… Okay, this off first."

He didn't know if the jumper was salvageable. It was clearly more important to Chu Wanning to get free of it: Mo Ran knew that his scrupulous cleanliness would mean the vomit was especially disgusting to him. Between them they managed to pull the jumper off, probably stretching it irrevocably, but Chu Wanning was visibly relieved when it was off him, and he sank back on the bed in exhaustion.

"I've got an idea – gimme one sec," Mo Ran said, and carried it out. He threw it in the washing machine, and then pulled a dry t-shirt, tracksuit bottoms and a hoodie off the clothes-dryer.

"These are clean, I promise, I've just pulled them off the line," he said, racing back to the bedroom with his offering. "I know you don't- that you'd- I'll close my eyes, okay? But you'd be more comfortable in these, they're dry and clean and warm, I can wash the others…"

There was no complaint that this would be inappropriate. Chu Wanning seemed resigned to the situation; they were in it together, now. Mo Ran kept his promise and closed his eyes as he held Chu Wanning up, letting him unbutton his shirt and trousers.

The tracksuit bottoms were too much for him, but his legs were under the duvet in any case. Once the t-shirt was on, Mo Ran could open his eyes again, and help him with the hoodie.

Chu Wanning was swimming in it. The sleeves covered his hands, and the dark colour made him look even more pale. He was staring up at Mo Ran with that strange open face again, the one that suddenly made him look like a slim, hurt man in his twenties, rather than the evil, icy genius, the Beidou Immortal.

Once, Mo Ran would have thought that he looked cute. Instead, he felt sick.

Now that he was in clean clothes and able to sit up a little better, Chu Wanning drank the rest of the water in silence. His eyelids were dropping by the time he finished the glass, tired out by the effort of changing, and Mo Ran gently lay him back down.

“I’ll wash these and make us something to eat. I’ll leave the door open. Just make a noise if you want me, and I’ll…”

His chin trembled. “I’m so sorry.” Chu Wanning blinked at him sleepily. Mo Ran swiped at his eyes and forced himself to smile. “Later. Later. Just sleep.”

Chapter 18: The Widening Rift

As the evening drew in, Mo Ran heard movement from the bedroom. When he went in, Chu Wanning was leaning heavily on the wall, trying to move towards the bathroom. His legs were long, slim and pale, and Mo Ran ducked behind the door again, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Do... you want a hand?”

There was a harsh grunt from inside, clearly a negation. Mo Ran waited in agony for the sound of the bathroom door to close and peeked inside again. Chu Wanning had taken the tracksuit bottoms with him, so, that was one problem solved.

It was a long time before Chu Wanning emerged. Mo Ran had just been thinking he should break the door down, but then there was Chu Wanning, thankfully wearing trousers and glaring at him.

“Just wanted to help you back in,” he said, and Chu Wanning waved him back. So he watched with his heart in this throat as Chu Wanning made his torturous journey back to the bed and collapsed into it.

Mo Ran at least helped to bring the duvet back over him. “How are you feeling?”

“Mm.” Chu Wanning moved his hand. A little better, Mo Ran guessed.

Mo Ran nodded. “Right. Um. I’ve got you some more water, and I’m making some food. I’m starving. Just some chicken congee, but… you should try to eat it, if you can.”

“Mn.”

“Do you… want anything?”

“Nn.”

“Right. Um. I’ll get dinner ready, then… Here’s your phone, and the stuff in your pockets.” There hadn’t been much: a new purse, very incongruous. Flowery embroidered silk, probably from the night market, more like a woman’s make-up pouch than a man’s wallet. Keys. A mechanical pencil. A Leatherman multi-tool. The haitang handkerchief, now stained. A pill-case. Two squashed White Rabbit sweets.

Those sweets had made his heart ache.

“I’ve put the rest of it in the wash with the jumper, I can bring it in when we start up again…”

“Mn. … thank you.”

The syllables were heavy and solid, each one distinctly shaped and bitten out. Mo Ran sighed in relief. “No problem.”

Chu Wanning was sitting up when he brought the two bowls of congee through. He sat cross-legged on the end of the bed, but the thought of eating made him want to throw up.

“We need to discuss what happens now.” Chu Wanning was looking down at his hands, folded primly on top of the duvet. His voice was ice-cold, as hard as steel, each word produced as though with a diamond cutter.

Mo Ran closed his eyes. He nodded.

He’d been planning that, had the drug worked as it should have, he’d have had blackmail material against Chu Wanning. Mutually assured destruction. But now Chu Wanning was going to go to the police, and if the bar had CCTV… Mo Ran was fucked. Utterly and

completely. Thrown out of university, probably a prison sentence. The Xues would never forgive him.

It was nothing less than he deserved.

“With your permission,” Chu Wanning was saying, “I would like… not to report it.”

Wait, what?

“Wait, what?”

“I think it’s quite likely that you were the intended victim, so if you want the police to investigate, then of course, I will report it,” Chu Wanning said. He sounded like *he* was the one on the gallows, rather than Mo Ran.

“But… you were the victim. If you were the *intended* victim, why- I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t you want to do to the police?”

“I don’t trust them.”

He said it so straightforwardly. The wheels in Mo Ran’s brain spun uselessly.

“But… I know some of the letters *said* they were from the police…”

“Before the letters. I just don’t trust them. The police serve the interests of those in authority, those with power, not ordinary people. I don’t want anything to do with them, any of them.”

“But…” If Chu Wanning didn’t go to the police, no one would check the bar’s CCTV. No one would find out Mo Ran was the spiker. A reprieve glimmered in front of him. “Are you

sure?”

“Are *you* sure?” Chu Wanning asked. “I really do think you were in danger. And it… it would be selfish of me to put you in further danger because I don’t like the police.”

If it wasn’t the letters, if it was older than that… Why would Chu Wanning, of all people, distrust the police? Mo Ran had never known such a stickler for the rules –

But of course, that was what he had already realised, when Shi Mei had told him the truth. Who would suspect a notorious hardass, the purer-than-driven-snow Sexless Savant, who cared so much about his fucking face and fucking reputation, of anything untoward? Here was Chu Wanning straight-up *admitting* that he didn’t want to go to the police. Was he worried about them uncovering something else?

It felt hypocritical to think it, when Mo Ran was the only one there whom he was certain had spiked someone’s drink. But that would corroborate what Shi Mei had told him, wouldn’t it? He felt a fresh wave of guilt, this time for having doubted Shi Mei.

“Would you tell me why?”

Chu Wanning’s lips were tight and thin. “It’s not relevant.”

“But…” What was he *doing*? He should be thanking whatever god had had mercy on him, not prodding Chu Wanning! “Okay. It’s up to you. You’re the one who was hurt.”

Chu Wanning’s shoulders dropped, just a little. He tried an experimental mouthful of congee. “Thank you, for this. For all of this.”

His gut wrenched. “Please don’t. I feel guilty enough.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Fucking hell. “I invited you. I picked the place. I didn’t take you to the hospital.”

“You saved my life. Then you protected my reputation.”

Oh, this was *so fucking fucked*. “I mean it, Chu-*laoshi*. Please don’t.”

Chu Wanning lowered his bowl and spoon. He looked… sad. “Right… yes. Hm.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s clearly something.”

“Just…” A blush was rising up Chu Wanning’s neck, staining his ears, but he looked so dejected. “Nothing. I’m sorry, that’s all. Sorry you saw me like that.”

That was what he was worried about? “What, a human being?”

Chu Wanning glared at him. He ate another mouthful of congee like it was a rebuke. “I should go home.”

“You’re still not well. You can stay another night.”

“It would be inappropriate.”

“I think we’re beyond that now, aren’t we?” Mo Ran said.

Chu Wanning nearly dropped the bowl. “We- of course not! As *you* said. I’m your teacher, and- and I am sorry too that I must ask you to lend me these clothes.”

Confused by the sudden change of subject, Mo Ran blurted out the first words that came to mind. “I’m hardly going to make you go out naked, am I?” Stupid! Fuck! How could he be so fucking *stupid-?*

He wished Chu Wanning was gone. He wished he was alone in his flat, so that he didn’t have to be reminded constantly of what he had done, so that Chu Wanning didn’t keep finding – apparently entirely by accident – ways to torment him, torture him with guilt or with lust or with the terror of being found out.

“I’ll call a taxi for you.”

*

The final week of the spring holiday was one of the longest of Mo Ran’s life. The evening Chu Wanning left Mo Ran got so drunk he gave Chu Wanning a run for his money in terms of bad nights, and then drank his way through the hangover as well.

Xue Meng’s calls and jubilant text messages went unanswered. He missed the trip to pick him up from the airport.

He tried six times to phone Shi Mei, and cancelled the call every time. What would he even say to him? *“Hi, um, so, I might fancy Chu Wanning. Yeah, even after you told me he was a sexual predator. Also, I drugged him, and nearly fucked him, and escaped being caught only because he’s so afraid of getting caught by the police for something else. Anyway, this has all got a bit complicated and so I’m afraid our quest for justice is probably at an end, bye, miss you!”*

Chu Wanning didn't e-mail him, except for the normal missive to both Mo Ran and Xue Meng reminding them of their start-of-term duties.

Ever the micromanager, Chu Wanning made his students come in a day early at the beginning of every term, to sort the post, note the deliveries, clean up the lab and organise it before the lab technicians and cleaners arrived on the first day of term. He said this was the kind of thing they would need to know about if they ever wanted to run their own labs one day, but Mo Ran had always thought it was just an excuse for him to use his students as a bit of free labour.

All the new tools, equipment, office supplies, lubricants, fuel and compressed gases had to be opened, catalogued, and put away. It was one of the worst days of the year, and given how awkward it had been when Mo Ran had helped Chu Wanning down to the taxi, it was going to be an All-Time Champion of Shit.

Chu Wanning looked immaculate. Hair washed and sleek, back in its high ponytail; pure white turtleneck, pure white labcoat, dove grey trousers. Only the slightest green ghost of a bruise on one cheekbone suggested anything out of the ordinary had happened over the break.

"Ah, Mo Ran, good morning," he said, voice back to glacial. It was like a different man had been in Mo Ran's bed, swamped in his hoodie. Moaning under his lips. "We'll start with the smaller parcels and leave the barrels for after lunch. I just need to find my clipboard…"

He *scurried* to his office, gaze turned pointedly downward. Right, yep. All the hard work of the last few months was down the drain anyway, Mo Ran realised. Chu Wanning couldn't even bear to make eye contact with him now.

"Yoooo! National Robotics Champion coming through!"

Fuck me sideways. "Morning to you too."

"Sorry?" Xue Meng said, cupping his ear with an obnoxious grin, "What was that? I'm afraid all the cheers are still ringing in my ears!"

“That’s just wax. Might want to get mummy to syringe that for you.”

“Haha! Is someone jealous? Just because I’m the Champion of the Lab, dog!”

“Xue Meng!” Chu Wanning shouted as he stormed back out of his office. “I hope that epithet was not directed at your cousin?”

Oh, fuck, there was a lot going on between Mo Ran and Chu Wanning, but the way Xue Meng instantly paled was fucking *delicious*.

“No, no! Of course not.”

“Ah! So it was directed at *me*?”

“No!” Xue Meng practically wailed. Mo Ran suddenly realised that Xue Meng *didn’t* realise that Chu Wanning was smiling. The quirk in the corner of his mouth was subtle, he supposed, but absolutely unmistakable.

Chu Wanning had become so much more expressive over the last few months… Or perhaps he had always been, and Mo Ran had just learnt to read him, like a fascinating book in a strange language or a secret code.

A book he was never going to be able to open again.

“Um, Chu-*laoshi*… I was actually wondering…” Xue Meng was saying, now the very image of humility, “Longcheng got some damage in the penultimate round, and I was hoping I could work on her before everyone else got back to the Robotics Lab…”

“Absolutely not. I said you could participate in the competition if it didn’t interfere with your normal responsibilities. This is something that we do as a lab.”

“Please? If you and Mo Ran do all the cataloguing, I’ll do the cleaning later! All of it!”

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. It was a tempting offer, Mo Ran knew. Chu Wanning *hated* cleaning. But it would mean he was alone all day in the lab with Mo Ran.

“Fine. I want to be able to see my reflection in every piece of chrome.”

“Yes! Yes, absolutely, Chu-*laoshi*, it’ll be perfect!”

Xue Meng bolted before Chu Wanning could change his mind, and Chu Wanning sighed.

“Just us, then. You open, and I’ll check against our order-sheet.”

“Sure thing.”

He cast sidelong glances at Chu Wanning as they worked, noting the numbers of pencils and paperclips, screw jacks and helical springs and frictions. It was hypnotic work, at least for Mo Ran – slide over, slice open, check contents, carry to the side.

It meant that he was thinking about other things. What was he going to *do*? The sensible thing would be to be scrupulously appropriate at all times. Chu Wanning would like that. Put away all his lewd thoughts, and put away all his thoughts of vengeance too. Be a robot, just like him.

But the problem was that he wasn’t a robot, and Mo Ran knew it now. Now he knew Chu Wanning’s preferences and insecurities, some of his godawful past, his stupid hobbies and interests. He knew how wicked his sense of humour could be, how cute he could look when

he was pretending to be annoyed, how beautiful he looked in the dawn snowlight, practising his tai chi.

He knew the way his mouth tasted, and what his firm, lithe body felt like under Mo Ran's hands.

He knew how shy he was, how jealous of his pride. How awkwardly kind he could be.

He knew what he had done to Shi Mei.

"So…" he said after an hour, "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Yeah. Yeah, me too. Um…" He opened the next box, eyes on Chu Wanning. "Do you fancy a caffeine break?"

"No. Thank you."

"Okay… What were you up to, the last week?"

"I'm writing a paper for JESTECH on magnetoplasmadynamic thrusters. What was that one?"

"Um, two epicyclic gear trains. Magnetoplasmadynamic thrusters, that's… that's cool."

"Mn." Chu Wanning ticked off something on his clipboard.

“Xue Meng’s probably going to be insufferable for about a month…”

“He’s done very well, but if he is unkind, please alert me and I’ll speak to him,” Chu Wanning said. As though he’d never slept in Mo Ran’s bed.

“Right…” Mo Ran yanked the tab to open the next parcel, and something felt different.

It pulled, tugged, and then gave. Sharply. There was a spark inside, visible through the slit in the cardboard.

Mo Ran looked down at the top of the box. There was no neatly printed label for the Xiu Sheji Laboratory, but a handwritten address to *Dr. Chu Wanning, Sisheng University*.

He looked at Chu Wanning.

He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know what to say. But somehow, Chu Wanning read the terrified apology in his eyes.

“*NO!”*

Three things happened in almost instantaneous succession.

Chu Wanning tackled Mo Ran to the ground, knocking all the breath from his lungs, smacking his forehead into Mo Ran’s chin.

The back of Mo Ran’s head bounced off the concrete floor.

And the world exploded.

Chapter 19: Water Recedes, Rocks Appear

The lights were dim, and there were three other people in the room. Mo Ran blinked, and blinked again; the world was fuzzy, and a woman's face hovered in front of his vision. For a brief, beautiful moment, he thought... "Mama?"

“He’s waking up – Meng'er, go and fetch the doctor! Ran'er? Ran'er, it’s Auntie.”

“Auntie….?” The pain in his head was like a rusty saw, like a wooden spear, like the wide prongs of an anchor. “Where are we?”

“Ya’an. We’re in the hospital in Ya’an.”

“My head hurts…”

She was stroking his hair. “You’re got a fractured skull, sweetheart. It’s a linear fracture though, you didn’t need surgery, don’t worry. But you’ve got a nasty concussion.”

“Concussion? What happened?”

“You… There was an accident, at the lab.”

“Not an accident, darling.” His uncle, looking and sounding uncharacteristically serious. “Xue Meng said Yuheng said that much. There was an explosion, Ran'er. Do you remember anything?”

An explosion? No, of course not. “We were cataloguing the post…” His aunt turned away, swiping at her face. “What…?”

“The police want to talk to you,” Xue Zhengyong said gently, and Mo Ran immediately began to struggle. His run-ins with the police as a youth had never been pleasant, but now they’d found him, they knew he spiked that drink-

“Easy, easy,” Xue Zhengyong said, hands on his shoulders. “Just to ask you what happened before the explosion. Anything you can remember. Anything at all.”

“They shouldn’t be asking him anything in this state!” Wang Chuqing hissed.

“No, but the first twenty-four hours are crucial, and we’re already at twelve. If they want to catch who did this-”

“He’s confused, he’s in pain, don’t be so cruel!”

“I’m not being cruel, I’m being practical. Someone attacked our friend, our nephew – our *son*-”

“There was a parcel,” Mo Ran croaked. His aunt stopped glaring at his uncle, and brought a glass of water to his lips. His skin on his face felt taut; when he looked down at his hands, they were red. “It… It was addressed to Chu Wanning. Not- not the lab. Where- where is he?”

“He’s… He’s here,” Xue Zhengyong said carefully. “In the hospital. He carried you out.”

Mo Ran closed his eyes and exhaled shakily. Chu Wanning was okay. If he’d carried Mo Ran out, it couldn’t have been that bad.

If he’d been able to carry Mo Ran out then his fractured skull must have been the only major injury, and it was from Chu Wanning’s self-sacrificial melodrama instead of from the actual bomb. You had to laugh, and Mo Ran did.

In the corner of his eye Xue Meng was surging towards him, a tsunami of rage. “What the FUCK did you just-”

“It’s shock, Meng'er.”

“He just *laughed!*”

“And that’s very common. It’s all right, Ran'er,” Wang Chuqing said. She moved to the side for the doctor to come close to the bed – a good-looking doctor, tall, with delicate features and wide eyes. Mo Ran was concussed, not blind.

Then he *was* blind, because the doctor was rudely shining a torch in his eyes.

“Hmm. Can you follow my finger? Yes, that’s good, like that.”

There was some kind of plastic tube across his face, between his upper lip and his nose. The air that came from it was lovely and cool, but… “My chest hurts…”

“It’s something called pulmonary barotrauma,” the doctor said. “Blast lung. It means you got all the breath knocked out of you. And you inhaled quite a bit of smoke. That tube there’s called a nasal cannula, and it’s giving you plenty of oxygen to help, so just keep it on.”

The doctor said things to his aunt and uncle; Mo Ran allowed himself to drift away on the doctor’s gentle voice. All their voices were muffled, overwritten by a ringing. Had there really been an explosion?

He remembered Chu Wanning’s voice. He had never heard it like that before. He had never heard a voice so scared…

His breath wheezed out of his lungs, and there was pain between his ribs, but it was nothing compared to the pain in his head. Stupid Chu Wanning. He was… he was going to feel so

silly. But Mo Ran wished he could see him, just to make sure. Where was he? Probably getting a soymilk from the vending machine, ridiculous…

The voice in his head was becoming more and more urgent. Chu Wanning was okay, right? He carried him out, so he had to be okay. As though something like an explosion could hurt Chu Wanning…

His heart was racing. The screen next to him was beeping.

“It’s all right, Ran'er, you’re all right,” he realised his uncle was saying to him. “I’m going to take your Auntie to the hotel, but Meng'er’s going to stay right here, you won’t be alone. We’ll catch a few hours of sleep, and then we’ll come and swap with him. There are police at the entrance and in the corridor, so don’t worry about that.”

“Where’s Chu-*laoshi* though?”

“He… he’s here. In the hospital. You just sleep, okay?”

The doctor left, followed by his uncle and aunt after some final reassurances that everything would be all right. The question of the police seemed to have been shelved for the minute. They shut the glass door behind them, and Mo Ran vaguely realised that they must have paid for a private room for him.

“Well *fucking* done.”

He opened his eyes again. Xue Meng sat next to his bed, looking down at him with an expression of poison.

“Oh, fuck off.”

“You fuck off! This is all your fault!”

“You’re just feeling guilty that you fucked off this morning,” Mo Ran said. He had an instinct for cruelty, and wasn’t surprised to see how Xue Meng blanched at his words. Bullseye. “Annoyed that someone else is getting all the attention for once?”

“You stupid bastard!” Xue Meng looked like he was about to burst into tears.

“At least your precious Longcheng wasn’t in there.”

“You are such a piece of shit!” Xue Meng shouted, and then he was gone. He tried to slam the door behind him, but it was fitted with a fire-closer. It almost made Mo Ran laugh again to see him forced to give up the attempt.

He closed his eyes again. Why didn’t they give him something more for the pain? He was hooked up to something, but *fuck*, his head hurt.

He remembered tugging open the tab. There was a spark… Chu Wanning, screaming at him…

Where was he?

He’d probably gone home, too furious to actually see Mo Ran face-to-face. He wondered what kind of state the lab was in. It couldn’t have been too big an explosion, if a pulmonary barawhatever and a concussion were the worst injuries. But… but he had a growing feeling of dread, like pressure building in the air, pressing down on his chest. Something was very wrong, he was sure of it. However angry he was, Chu Wanning wouldn’t have just *left*. What had happened, after he’d tackled Mo Ran? What was happening?

“A-Ran?”

He opened his eyes, and standing in front of him was Shi Mei, as beautiful as an angel.

“Shi Mei,” he said, and suddenly the tears were bubbling over. He didn’t know where they had come from.

“*Xu, xu*, it’s all right. I’m so glad you’re okay. I can’t stay, but- What happened?”

“I think it was my fault,” Mo Ran whispered. *Dr. Chu Wanning, Sisheng University*. “Someone sent us a parcel. I think it was a bomb…”

Shi Mei kept looking at the door. “It was. It was a nail bomb. From what I’ve heard it hit one of the compressed gas cannisters. There was a fire. Are you all right?”

“They said I’ve got a fractured skull. Do they know who sent it?”

“No, there’s loads of police around.” Shi Mei cupped his cheek with his hand. “Don’t cry, A-Ran.”

“I opened it. I forgot; I wasn’t looking-“

“It’s all right. It’s not your fault. Were there any markings, any letter?”

“No. Just the address. Shi Mei, where’s Chu Wanning?”

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

Xue Meng stood in the doorway, holding a can of Hi-Tiger. Shi Mei instantly pulled away from the bed.

“What- what were you doing to him?!”

“Nothing! Xue Meng-”

The golden Hi-Tiger can dropped to the ground and bounced before splitting open. Xue Meng’s fist slammed into Shi Mei’s nose and there was a spurt of blood.

“Get out!” Xue Meng screamed. “Get *out!*”

His second punch was dodged by Shi Mei, moving with more speed that Mo Ran had ever seen from him, and Shi Mei sprinted for the door. Mo Ran struggled with the stupid oxygen tube, trying to get out of bed and wishing the world would stop spinning. “Wait-!”

Xue Meng had dashed to the door and was shouting down the corridor. “Don’t you ever come back! Fuck off! Mo Ran, what the fuck are you doing?!”

“What am *I* doing? You just- you fucking broke Shi Mei’s nose!”

“It’s the least that bastard deserves! Get into bed, you’re- great, great, now the thing’s fucking beeping-”

“Yeah, that’s my fucking *heart*, thanks! What- Xue Meng!”

Xue Meng was pressing Mo Ran back onto the bed. “Get in. Get in! If you hurt yourself more I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Xue Meng,” Mo ran said, and gripped his wrist. “What is *happening?!*”

Xue Meng paused, chest heaving, and despite his blurred vision Mo Ran could see the tears in his eyes. “He- He’s not a good person, Mo Ran. He’s bad. He’s- He’s a bad person.”

“Shi Mei. *Shi Mei?* Are you serious?”

“He-” Xue Meng glanced at the door, mouth caught in a grimace. “Shit! I’m not supposed to- He assaulted Chu-*laoshi*. That’s why he left Sisheng.”

Mo Ran sunk back into the pillows. Oh, this was a fucking mess. “No.”

“I know. I know, but he did. He shoved Chu-*laoshi* up against the whiteboard in his office and he- he *kissed* him-”

“No, shit, Xue Meng, you’ve got it wrong. Chu Wanning kissed Shi Mei.”

Xue Meng looked down at him, suddenly very still. “What?”

“Shi Mei told me.”

“When?”

“A while ago. He didn’t want anyone to know, he thought no one would believe him. It’s Chu Wanning who threatened *him*, said that if he didn’t go along with it he’d kick Shi Mei out-”

“He’s a fucking *liar*.” Xue Meng was no longer shouting, but there was something dangerous rising in his voice.

“That’s what he said you’d-”

“I was *there!*” he snarled. “That- That piece of- Chu-*laoshi* was writing on the board, and Shi Mei went up behind him and *shoved* him against it and *kissed* him. And he put his hand- He-”

“I don’t believe you,” Mo Ran said simply. He *couldn’t* believe it.

“And *I* knew *you’d* say that,” Xue Meng replied, voice laced with venom, a vein throbbing in his forehead. He was fumbling with his phone. “So I downloaded the footage from the lab cameras. I knew you’d believe your precious *Shi Mei* over the man who actually gave a fuck about you, over the man who helped you for *years*-”

He held his phone sideways and shoved it in Mo Ran’s face.

One of the web cameras Chu Wanning had set up around the lab was in an upper corner of his office, above the door. Chu Wanning stood at the whiteboard, his ponytail swishing backwards and forwards as he hurriedly wrote something. There was no sound, but Mo Ran could practically hear him; instead of his usual cold monotone, his voice became animated and flowing when he was talking about engineering – or space, or fencing, or history, or music, or penzai, or any of the dozen new subjects Mo Ran had discovered his interest in.

Shi Mei was standing up. He said something that made Chu Wanning turn around, whiteboard marker in his hand, and then he pushed forward, capturing Chu Wanning between the board and his body. Shi Mei was tall, almost as tall as Mo Ran; he loomed over Chu Wanning, and even on a phone screen, the force of the kiss was unmistakable. His left hand went up to cup Chu Wanning’s face, just as he had done to Mo Ran minutes ago, and his right-

The right-

Shi Mei’s right hand cupped against Chu Wanning’s groin. Chu Wanning’s arms were stiff; the one Mo Ran could see was held out at the side, fingers splayed open, frozen.

There must have been a sound, because Shi Mei suddenly turned towards the door, and Chu Wanning shoved him away. He scrambled behind his office chair, giving it a push so that it rolled in between himself and Shi Mei to hinder any pursuit; Shi Mei had his hands out, saying something earnestly, but Chu Wanning had fled to the other side of the desk and pressed himself against the wall. Shi Mei was talking. Chu Wanning was circling around, careful to remain out of reach; there was movement at the bottom of the screen which must have been him making a break for it and sprinting out of the door.

"But-" Mo Ran said. His brain simply refused to comprehend what it was seeing. "But he- I don't understand-"

"*I* don't understand!" Xue Meng was still holding out his phone; he had clipped the video, and it had gone back to the beginning again, Chu Wanning obliviously lecturing away. "If Shi Mei told you that Chu Wanning had kissed *him*, why have you been so friendly with him? What were you up to? Were you trying to get him to *confess*?"

Mo Ran had never heard Xue Meng sound like this before, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the screen. Shi Mei's hand on Chu Wanning's crotch. He must have broken the oxygen tube when he'd tried to get up, because he couldn't *breathe*- "Stop it!"

"You stop it!" Xue Meng shouted nonsensically. "You fucker, you piece of shit! I hate you!"

"Just shut up!"

"No! I fucking *hate you!* All this time, you've thought Chu-*laoshi* was- was some kind of predator, and you've been trying to get close to him? That's what you've been doing?!"

Mo Ran finally wrenched his gaze from the phone, and he felt his stomach drop away. Xue Meng had tears streaming down his face, his breath was hitching, his mouth was open and twisted.

The world turned to fire and smoke.

“Where is he? Xue Meng, *where is Chu Wanning?*”

“They’re still operating on him!” Xue Meng collapsed into the chair, like a puppet with its strings cut.

“But-” Mo Ran shook is head, despite the unbearable pain the action caused him. “But he’ll be okay, right? They’ll- He’ll be all right?”

“They- They don’t think so. It’s been hours, and they- They don’t think-” Xue Meng was bawling like a child.

“No, *no*. No! Uncle said he carried me out, he can’t be-!”

“He did! But he- There was so much blood. His back was… exposed! I could see bone! All raw and blistered, and with these… these *nails*, sticking out of his shoulder. That would have been your face, Mo Ran! That should have been you, and he took it for you!”

“But-” He’d never known agony like this. He couldn’t see for the blood in his eyes. “But *why*, if he was injured too?”

“Think of the fucking lab! Hydrogenated catalysts, compressed gasses, everything. One of the nails must have pierced a can, there was a second explosion, the fire was spreading, and there wasn’t any *time*, and he-”

Xue Meng’s breathing hitched; he was sobbing so hard Mo Ran could feel the pain between his own ribs.

“He put you on his back. His raw back, that had been blown off, and he put all of your fucking weight on it. All those hours at the *fucking* gym, wow, so *fucking* useful! You piece of shit! Just more weight for him to carry, hauling your *useless ass* out of- He put you on his back, and he dragged himself over broken glass and hot shrapnel on his hands and knees to get you out before it all blew again!”

Mo Ran shook his head; it was full of wasps and hornets, droning loudly. “No. No, Xue Meng, *please*-”

“I saw it from the Robotics Lab! I ran over, he got you out just before the whole thing went- It’s a fucking *shell.* I pulled you off him, and I saw his back – there was so much blood, and those, those nails- He was delirious, and crying, and the only thing he kept asking was whether *you* were okay. ‘Where’s Mo Ran? Is he all right? Is Mo Ran hurt?’”

Mo Ran was trying and failing to pull the IV needle out of his hand. He needed to go. He needed to find Chu Wanning. He needed to get out; he couldn’t hear anything else. He’d die if he heard anything else.

Xue Meng shook his head, utterly broken. “He was apologising to *you*, and all this time you’ve been thinking he was- was- How could you? How could you think that of him?”

“Because he hated me!” Mo Ran wailed. “Because I worshipped the ground he walked on, and he looked down on me, and I couldn’t bear it! I loved him and he hated me!”

“Loved him? You never loved him! You stupid fucker! And he never hated you!” Xue Meng *grinned* at him, a ghastly, wretched thing. “*I* hated you. All your other professors hated you. Hated your stupid swagger and your shit marks and your paranoia and your illiteracy and your fucking street-dog bullshit! *He* was the only one who argued to let you stay, *he* was the one who tutored you until you could keep up, *he* was the one who spent hours and hours with you, for no pay, falling asleep at his desk, to make sure you got your degree. And you bitched and whinged and moaned the whole time because he was the only one who expected fucking *anything* from you! He thought so highly of you, and all this time you’ve been thinking he could be a *sexual predator? Chu Wanning*, a sexual predator?!”

Xue Meng started to laugh. It was high-pitched and hysterical and apparently impossible to stop; he laughed until the laughs turned into sobs.

“Xue Meng. What- Please.” Mo Ran felt as though he was falling. He was falling, and Xue Meng was far above him, looking down at him as he helplessly grasped the air. “What did they say? Where is he?”

In contrast to his laughter, Xue Meng's tears were quiet. "They're still operating on him. *Ge*, I… They don't think he's going to make it."

Chapter 20: Melt Stone and Fuse Gold

A little after one o'clock in the morning, the doctor from before came back into the room to let them know that Chu Wanning was out of surgery and was currently stable. Xue Meng had collapsed in tears, hugging the doctor in his relief.

"Thank you, Dr. Hua! You didn't have to stay up all this time-"

"Of course I did. We're academic brothers, aren't we?" Dr. Hua patted Xue Meng's back, and then went to the bed, where Mo Ran lay frozen. "Right, let's take a look at you… Mo Ran. Hm."

"Dr. Hua…" Then he remembered: Chu Wanning asking him to be present for a conversation with Shi Mei, and telling him that he would be going to work under Hua Binan of the Medical Faculty in Ya'an. "Hua Binan?"

Hua Binan gave him a pleasant smile. "Yes, that's right."

"Aren't you an engineer?"

"Ah, I was, of course, when I worked under Chu-*laoshi*, but doing biomedical and pharmacological engineering, so when I went to Guyueye they paid for me to do the MD. I came back to Ya'an for my residency training; I'm ten years older than everyone else at my stage, but it's what Guyueye wanted. So I'm not actually your doctor, don't worry! You have a consultant, but I asked to cover for him tonight, so I could hear any news and tell you about Chu-*laoshi*."

"None of the other doctors would tell us anything," Xue Meng said. "We're not his relatives."

"Yes – he has no next of kin listed, of course. I'll catch a couple of hours in the on-call room; I wouldn't have been able to sleep while they were operating on him," Hua Binan said. "Not in a million years."

Mo Ran heard this explanation as though it was being shouted at him through a storm. Chu Wanning was alive. He was alive and stable. He might be okay.

In contrast to Xue Meng's easy tears, none came for him. They had calcified behind his eyelids and felt like grit.

"If he's stable, what does that mean? What about his shoulder?"

"His shoulder's going to need multiple surgeries, I'm afraid. His scapular was almost completely shattered. But he's not strong enough for those yet. This surgery was to stop the internal bleeding and stabilise his heart. The next ones will be a skin graft for the burns, or there's more risk of the wounds becoming infected."

The day after Shi Mei had assaulted him Chu Wanning had asked him to witness the conversation. Why had Chu Wanning given Shi Mei such an easy escape, a chance for a dignified exit? He could have not only had Shi Mei kicked out of the university, he could have reported him to the police. Instead, he had arranged for him to be transferred to another supervisor as quietly as possible, so he could still finish his doctorate. He offered to co-sign bursary applications.

It was kindness and mercy that Mo Ran would never have been capable of, and Mo Ran had been furious. He'd grabbed Chu Wanning, forcing him to stay in the same room as his attacker for even longer. The delicate bones of his wrist had ground together, and Mo Ran had felt *satisfaction*. Chu Wanning had asked for Mo Ran to protect him, and instead, he'd hurt him.

Hu Binan was still talking to Xue Meng; an alarm went somewhere, and he ran out with an apology thrown over his shoulder.

"He's going to be okay, isn't he?" Xue Meng was saying next to him. "If he's stable, that means he's all right, right?"

Mo Ran tried to bring himself back to the present. “It’s good…”

Xue Meng stared at him, contempt quickly souring his joyous expression. “Do you even care?”

“Of course I care,” Mo Ran said, without heat, without anger. It was a fair question.

“It never even occurred to me that Chu- laoshi might be, you know, that way inclined. Any way inclined. I suppose I thought that he just had no interest in any of that, being, you know. What he is. Maybe it’s my fault, I shouldn’t have assumed…”

“If you made an assumption, it’s because it’s Chu Wanning*. He’s… completely sexless. Carved from stone. He barely counts as a human being.”*

His head just hurt so much… He could sleep now, knowing that Chu Wanning was alive. While he was alive, maybe, perhaps…

Maybe Mo Ran could atone.

*

“He didn’t say a word about Chu Wanning. Xue Meng was all over me, but *him*... Just asking my name. ‘Aren’t you an engineer?’ He didn’t care about Wanning at all.”

“I told you. He hates him. He’s the stupidest man I’ve ever met.”

“What a fool. It makes me so… angry. I didn’t think Wanning would fall for a handsome face…”

“It’s not just that. I think it’s *because* Mo Ran hates him so much. He senses his contempt, and he thinks he deserves that, so he’s drawn to it.”

“You’re right, A-Jing. It’ll be different, soon. When he’s with us, we’ll treat him properly.”

“He looks so… small. Will… will his face…?”

“It’s just bruising and inflammation, from the blast. That’ll all fade.”

“What about his back? Will the skin graft…?”

“It’ll scar. That doesn’t matter, though. It’s only on his back. You won’t even be able to see it if he’s wearing anything. For now, go home, we don’t want another scene. I’ll let you know if anything happens.”

Chu Wanning tried to hold onto the words, but they vanished like curls of smoke on the wind, impossible to grasp or comprehend. The only thing left was a cold, bone-deep fear.

He was becoming gradually aware that he was lying down – half on his side, half on his stomach, a wedge-shaped pillow beneath his left side. His chest hurt more than it had for a long, long time.

“Hey, you.”

Chu Wanning cracked his eyes open. The world was a chaos of light and shadow, vague, terrifying, shifting shapes coalescing into a face.

It reminded him of his first guqin concert. The same play of darkness, sketching out demonic, uncanny faces. Was that where he was? Did he have to play the guqin now?

Was Huaizui behind him, watching?

"*Xu, xu*, you're all right. You're safe now."

He didn't feel safe. He only felt dread. "Mo Ran?"

The face changed. Its smile vanished. "Mo Ran?"

"Where is he?" It felt as though he was speaking around a mouthful of cottonwool, a head full of pain. "Is he all right?"

"*He's* just fine."

"Where is he?" He tried to push himself up using his left arm, but nothing happened. The face was becoming sharper, and he could see the fury before he could recognise it.

"Sh- Shi Mingjing…?"

He had to move. He had to get away, but he couldn't; his limbs refused to obey him.

"You don't recognise me?" The voice was *angry*.

"Don't," Chu Wanning said. Forceful. He had to be forceful. Only it was difficult, when unconsciousness was trying to drag him under. "Mo Ran?"

"*Stop-!* Stop asking about him. He's fine. Do you not recognise *me*?"

Not the face, the shifting, terrifying face, but the voice- The voice. That hint of emotion deeply buried, powerful dislike tightly controlled…

"Hua Binan?"

"Yes! I knew you would!" The voice was cheerful and happy now. "You're going to be just fine. I'm just going to give you a little more morphine for the pain, all right? You gave us all such a scare, injuring yourself for that..."

"But… where's…" He needed to protect Mo Ran. He needed to get him out. He needed to…

*

The dawn brought the police, finally breaking through whatever protective measures Xue Zhengyong had set up. He was there too, despite Mo Ran being far too old to need a guardian present for such things.

Mo Ran answered questions until he was practically blind from the pain in his head. All about the parcel, about what was written on it. All about the messages Chu Wanning had received. The ones in the office had all been destroyed in the second blast.

He remembered the Monday morning after Shi Mei had lied to him, the first time he had manipulated Chu Wanning into making that terrible instant coffee for him. Mo Ran had noticed the shelf behind him, groaning under the weight of all his awards, and the penzai tree in its jade-coloured pot, with its single delicate flower.

He'd imagined the office on fire. He'd imagined Chu Wanning locked inside it.

"I feel sick."

“Just a few more questions, Mr. Mo. We need as many details about those anonymous letters as possible.”

I’d love to run into you in a dark alleyway. There will be no escape. I’m going to knock your teeth out so you can suck my cock better. You are not a human being. What kind of object are you?

“He keeps records of them on his computer. When he’s better he can print them out…”

“That’ll take too long. Do *you* know his computer password?”

Chu Wanning, grabbed by a disgusting man in a disgusting alley. Mo Ran hadn’t realised then who the disgusting man was. “No.”

“Ah, that’s a shame… Did he keep any in his home?”

“Some, if they were addressed there, I think.”

“Don’t read them, Mo Ran. A lot of them are dirty.”

He didn’t hear the next question. He couldn’t think of anything but Chu Wanning, sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by photo manipulations of his naked corpse and notes detailing his rape and murder, like a Buddha in a fucked-up mandala, looking up at him with that exhausted expression on his face.

“No, Mo Ran, look at me*. Do not open any parcels addressed to me. Ever. If it’s equipment or supplies, it should be addressed to the lab; if it’s addressed to me personally, leave it for me to open.”*

Something hard was stuck in his throat; he didn’t know whether it was vomit or a sob. His uncle hustled the police out, and then came back to his bedside. “There, there, Ran-er. Well

done. You did really well."

"Don't. Please, don't. It's all my fault…"

"Of course it isn't. None of this is your fault."

"He told me never to open- he *told* me-" And Mo Ran had been too distracted: by the thought of Chu Wanning in his bed, under his hands, under his lips. How funny he was, how kind he was, and what he had done to Shi Mei.

And what Mo Ran had done to him.

He wished he could just *cry*. He wanted to cry until he drowned in his own tears, but they wouldn't come. He didn't deserve that catharsis.

"He told me. It's all my fault."

"I'm going to try to see him again this afternoon," Xue Zhengyong said, squeezing his hand. "I bet you he'll be saying exactly the same thing as you, eh? You're both such good boys."

"Are- are they not letting you in?"

"I'm not family. But once he's awake, he can give permission."

"They're not… Uncle, he told me, about his father."

"Did he?" Xue Zhengyong looked surprised at that. "Ah, well, I never…"

“But he won’t turn up, will he? You can’t let them call him!”

“I know, I know. I know what that man… But no, he’s not listed as his next of kin. Yuheng just has no one there instead.”

*

Chu Wanning could hear an argument. A male voice and a female one, rising…

He groaned, and tried to push himself up from the bed. Nothing happened, except a growing pain was spreading over his back. It felt like fire.

“You’re not a relative, Mr. Xue, you can’t just-”

“Zhengyong?” Chu Wanning murmured. There was a triumphant noise from outside, and then there was Xue Zhengyong, crouching down besides his bed.

“Yuheng! Oh, I’ve never been so happy – how are you?”

“Thirsty…”

“Of course, of course – look, there’s a straw here, just there…”

The water tasted like liquid life. Chu Wanning could feel the coolness in his throat and his stomach; his cells blossomed with it.

He closed his eyes again against the brightness and the colours. “Where’s Mo Ran…?”

“He’s next door. He’s absolutely fine – a bit banged up, bit of a headache – but absolutely fine. Thanks to you. I’ll never be able to repay you, Yuheng.”

Chu Wanning made a sharp noise of negation. “My fault.”

“It’s *not*.”

“Nearly killed Mo Ran. Destroyed the lab.”

“Yes. Someone did. But not you, Yuheng. No, no, listen to me. I’m not an idiot. We always knew something like this could happen. I hired you with clear eyes, and I’m still glad that I did. You kept me abreast of all the threats, you had safety procedures in place.”

“Not enough. Should never have-” Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut.

He should never have taken the job at Sisheng. He knew he was at risk, and now Xue Zhengyong would pay for it.

Mo Ran had nearly paid for it with his life.

So that he could pretend he was still worth something, could still do something, could still help in some way. He had been delusional.

How could Xue Zhengyong say he was glad he’d hired him? How could he lie so kindly?

“Yuheng, your heart monitor’s going crazy. I mean it. Please, don’t upset yourself. Heh, or they’ll kick me out, eh? Hiring you was the right thing to do. I don’t regret a thing.”

“Stop it.” Chu Wanning turned his head to press his face into the pillow.

The hissing of gas around him. Mo Ran, so pale, the back of his head a bloody mess. All Chu Wanning's fault.

The grinding of glass and metal under his hands had been a relief. It was pain that he deserved.

"I'll come back in later. Wifey too. She's better with words than me, you know how rubbish I am. Always saying the wrong thing. But… we love you, Yuheng, and we're so grateful to you. We owe you everything."

"Please… Please, don't."

"I'm going, I'm going. Can the boys see you? They've been so worried. Mo Ran, I think it would really help him, to come in and see you."

"No."

*

Next door, Xue Meng leapt on his father as soon as he came in. "What did he say? Can we go in?"

"Ah, not yet, darling," Xue Zhengyong said. "He's very groggy from the pain medication, that's all."

"That's not it," Mo Ran said flatly. He knew how well Chu Wanning could think through both drugs and pain. How resolute. "He said 'no', didn't he?"

The expression on his uncle's face confirmed it. Mo Ran nodded, and leant back against the pillows.

He'd known it would be the case.

"It was my fault. He knows it. He told me, he was so strict about it, and I opened it."

"*No*, Ran-er. He really is out of it. He's very… I think he's in a lot of pain, that's all."

Chapter 21: The Realm of Ghosts

Apparently three days had now passed. Chu Wanning was barely aware of them. Traditionally the souls lingered near the body for seven days after death; surely that was what was happening to him. He woke, lying at that same strange angle, usually to Xue Zhengyong or Wang Chuqing sitting next to him. They spoke to him, voices soft and kind, and he was revolted by their words. He didn't deserve their kindness. He had nearly killed their boys.

So then he turned his face into the pillow, unable to meet the intensity of their gazes, unwilling in his shame to repulse them further with the sight of his face. And then, in the darkness, he slowly fell into a drugged sleep again.

In that sleep, he crawled, splinters of glass embedded in his hands, Mo Ran's dead weight on his back a suffocating, agonising burden. *Just live*, he thought, as the flames roared deafeningly around him. *Just live, Mo Ran, please. Please live.*

Then the compressed hydrogen behind him blew, and he woke up.

Xue Zhengyong, this time. They must have swapped. "It's all right," his friend said, dabbing sweat away from his forehead. "Just a dream."

The dream felt more real than the waking.

"What time is it?"

"Nearly ten. Pm. We're going to go back to the hotel and make Xue Meng get some sleep. Yuheng… He feels guilty that he wasn't there, and he wants to see you. But please… Mo Ran is desperate."

"I can't."

“I know you’re tired, I know you’re in pain-”

“I *can’t*.”

“He thinks you’re angry at him.”

This made Chu Wanning turn his head. Even the dim lamplight set off explosions behind his eyes, but Xue Zhengyong’s words were so astonishing he had to try to see. “He *what*?”

“He thinks you blame him for opening the parcel, for not looking at the address-”

“In,” Chu Wanning croaked. “Please. Where- where is he?”

Xue Zhengyong’s face lit up. “Just next door- wait, give me one second, you’re only allowed one person in at a time- one second, Yuheng-”

Chu Wanning felt his breath lodged tight behind his sternum, stretched taut between his ribs. Mo Ran thought that *he* was angry? *How?*

And there he was, a face he knew instantly, even with the white bandage across his forehead. His face was gaunt, his skin pale, and his jaw dropped when he saw Chu Wanning. He mouthed something helplessly.

He hadn’t seen a mirror. No one had offered, and he hadn’t asked. He’d been ugly before; now he was clearly grotesque. A last, miniscule spark of hope of which he hadn’t even been cognizant was snuffed out by the horrified expression on Mo Ran’s face.

He wanted to bury the *thing* that was his face in the pillow again, to spare Mo Ran the pain of seeing it. He did close his eyes; he was only so strong, and Mo Ran’s visible horror at his appearance was like a knife in his throat.

He had been ugly before, and he had thought that that had been painful. He must be hideous now. Hideous, worthless, and his play-acting at being a member of the human race had nearly killed two beautiful, clever boys, brimming with energy and laughter and fire. Chu Wanning had nearly roasted them alive, burnt offerings on the monstrous altar of his delusion.

Mo Ran was crouching down beside him, to look into his eyes; he touched his hand, but Chu Wanning couldn't feel it. They kept numbing his arm and shoulder with a powerful local anaesthetic to keep it immobile until he was strong enough for them to operate on it.

"Shizun," Mo Ran, voice trembling on that silly nickname; it was like a needle now, reminding Chu Wanning of the depth of his failure. Mo Ran wasn't just his student, but something almost like a friend as well. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry-"

"Hush, no. Mo Ran. It was I who wronged you. *I'm* sorry."

He refused to cry. He refused to let his voice shake. It was bad enough that he was inflicting his face on Mo Ran; he wouldn't force him to shoulder the burden of Chu Wanning's emotions too.

"I'm the one who opened it. You told me, you were so strict about it, you were so clear, but I was careless and distracted and I'm sorry, I've done so much, I've hurt you *so much*-"

"No, no, you haven't. You haven't. Please, listen to me. This is all my fault, Mo Ran."

"It's not! You don't even *know*- None of this is your fault! It's mine, I was so *stupid*-"

"No, no, no. No. It was me. I knew the risks, and I still… still taught you. I put you all at risk. All those threats, and I was… complacent."

"You *weren't*. I knew them too, I knew what kind of thing- and I opened it, I didn't look-"

“I should never have put you in that position. Ever. I’m sorry, Mo Ran.”

“*Please* don’t-“ Mo Ran’s breath shuddered out. “I did this. You saved my *life*.”

There was a glacial air, moving slowly through his mind. It was freezing his shame, his guilt, all his pain. It was freezing solid those warm feelings, buried deep in his breast. It was freezing his tenderness into something resolute.

“It should never have been at risk in the first place. Please, Mo Ran. It’s very important that you listen to me. None of this at all is your fault. Please don’t blame yourself.”

Mo Ran shook his head. “I’ll make it up to you. I’ll- I’ll look after you.”

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. “It’s all right. I’m fine, Mo Ran. Just fine.”

“You’re *not*. Look at you- Look at- You did that for me, and I don’t *deserve*-”

“Hush. Of course you do. I’d do it again in an instant.” Mo Ran was the only thing that could shatter the ice now; he needed him to leave. “I’m very tired…”

“Of course. Of course, Shizun. I’ll let you sleep. I’m just next door, okay? I’ll… I’m right here.”

“Go back to your room. I’m fine here. Just tired.”

*

He'd thought that seeing Chu Wanning might help. It didn't. That calm, quiet voice was like a whetstone, only honing and sharpening his guilt.

Even worse, after a sleepless night, was the nurse telling him that Chu Wanning was asking for him. Waiting outside the room were two people, a man and a woman, both in their mid- to late-twenties, handsome and wearing suits.

They stood to one side, glaring at him with undisguised suspicion. Cops, Mo Ran knew instinctively. He was aware that he was wearing a hoodie and tracksuit bottoms, brought by the Xues, with his head bandaged, but he strode past them as though he was an Emperor. *He* had been asked for by Chu Wanning, while they had to wait outside.

They'd added more of those wedge-shaped pillows, so that he could lie on his side without his shoulder receiving any more pressure. It had new, fresh bandages on it, hiding the raw flesh from sight, but Chu Wanning's bruised face was even more visible this morning, at the newer raised angle.

"Mo Ran," he said, shifting as much as he could. "I'm sorry to trouble you."

"Trouble me, please," Mo Ran said, immediately taking the chair next to the bed. "Thank you for troubling me."

Chu Wanning's eyelids fluttered closed for a second. He was so pale, underneath the swollen cuts and the bruises and the burns. He swallowed painfully.

"I've been told that there are two officers outside, from Beijing. I… would appreciate your presence."

"Yeah, they're outside. I mean… Chu-*laoshi*, do you… They just want to ask you about the bomb, or the threats. They've been in to me every day. You don't need a lawyer- at least, I don't *think*-"

“No, I know. But they won’t wait. And I don’t speak to police alone. Ever. I just need… I’m sorry, to ask this of you. But I need…”

Chu Wanning’s voice was cracking; after the firmness of the night before, Mo Ran could hear the hesitance.

“I just need someone with me.”

“I’m your man,” Mo Ran said, as though the words didn’t stick in his own throat like fish hooks. After the drink-spiking- *no*, after Mo Ran had spiked his drink, he had to be careful of that – Chu Wanning had said that he didn’t trust the police. *“The police serve the interests of those in authority, those with power, not ordinary people. I don’t want anything to do with them, any of them.”*

He’d thought it had been yet more evidence of Chu Wanning’s guilt.

“Thank you. All right. They can come in.”

His heart ached as he saw Chu Wanning try to make his face as cold and intimidating as possible, as though he wasn’t wedged on his side in a ludicrous position, as though his face wasn’t marked with the evidence of Mo Ran’s sins.

And then, as the police officer stepped inside, it fell completely open again.

“*A-Si?*”

The man stared down at Chu Wanning with open contempt. “Officer Nangong Si. This is my colleague, Ye Wangxi.” He spoke with the confident enunciation of the extremely wealthy and expensively educated, and Mo Ran felt his hackles rise when the man looked at him. “You must be Mo Ran. You can leave.”

“He stays,” Chu Wanning said sharply. He was visibly scrambling to regain his composure, a task no doubt made more difficult with the potent cocktail of painkillers he was on. “You joined the *police*?”

“Yes.” Nangong Si was staring at Chu Wanning, and Mo Ran realised that this man was *boilingly* angry.

The woman, Ye Wangxi, gave him an apologetic shrug.

“Fine. If you want him to stay, *Dr. Chu*. That’s up to you. If you want him to hear what I have to say.”

Chu Wanning blinked. “You’re not here about the bomb?”

Ye Wangxi spoke. “I’m sorry about this, Dr. Chu-”

“No, we’re not here about the bomb. That just made me realise that I needed to come to this shithole as soon as I could, before someone finally managed to kill you.”

Mo Ran stood up slowly. No one spoke to Chu Wanning like this. “Get out.”

Nangong Si stared back at him, his lip curling his smile into a sneer. “Aw, it’s good to see he has a new one to defend him. That was me, once. I’d have taken a bullet for him. You probably think he’s amazing, right? And he is, right until it’s inconvenient, and he fucks off to some new job.”

Chu Wanning sighed. “Is that why you’ve come all this way, *Officer Nangong*? You waited a long time.”

Nangong Si’s hands were clenched in fists. “No. No, you making a scene at *my mother’s funeral* and then fucking off without a word, that’s just the kind of shit you do, isn’t it? No,

I'm here because of *this*."

He held out a piece of paper in a plastic evidence bag. Chu Wanning looked unimpressed.

"I can't read that."

"No? Fine. I'll read it for you. *Plenty of people want to see Chu Wanning dead, but I know someone who wants it more than most. Your father needs to hire better people.*"

"What?" Chu Wanning frowned; he tried to push himself up, but the fingers of his left arm only twitched.

"That was delivered to my flat." Nangong Si's voice was shaking. The note trembled in his grip. "No fingerprints. No one caught on camera. What the fuck does it mean?"

Mo Ran was staring at Chu Wanning. Horror ghosted across his face; horror, fear, then something else that creased a line between his brows. Something that twisted his mouth, making him look like he was about to cry. Making him look suddenly so much younger.

Nangong. He *knew* that name, of course. Of course. But what was the context with Chu Wanning? Where the fuck did he know it from? The context was… neon lights. Chivas and tea.

"Rufeng itself is fine. It's its President, Nangong Liu."

"You're Nangong Liu's son," Mo Ran said. Nangong Si turned on him.

"Fuck off. This is none of your business."

“It became my business when I was in that fucking explosion. And you’re, what, pretending to help in the investigation so that you can come an interrogate the victim?” He looked at Ye Wangxi. “And he’s dragged you into it too? Great. Typical fucking cop *bullshit*.”

“Mo Ran. It’s all right.” Chu Wanning had used the distraction to bring his face back under control. “Officer Nangong has questions. I have no idea who sent that note, or if Nangong Liu really is behind... I can't even think about that right now. But if your father is running for Mayor of Shanghai… I can think of at least two men who would be a position to blackmail him. Mo Ran, could I trouble you for…”

He was already there with the glass of water. “Here. Are you all right…?”

“Fine. Fine, thank you.” Chu Wanning swallowed, and his voice was clearer. “Sit down, Officer Nangong. I… Hm. This is difficult, for me. But it will be more difficult for you. Certain truths, once told, cannot be unheard. I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted things to remain as they are.”

“I’m a police officer. It’s my job to seek out the truth.”

“Is that so,” Chu Wanning said. “Hm. Right. As your mother used to say, I’ll just come out with it. Your father killed her.”

Whatever Mo Ran had been expecting, that wasn’t it. “What?”

“Bullshit,” Nangong Si said. “You fucking *liar*.”

“A-Si,” Ye Wangxi said, and gripped his shoulder. “You said-”

“Shut up!”

Mo Ran stepped forwards, but unnecessarily; Ye Wangxi was unperturbed. “No. We’ve come all this way. Let him finish.”

No, don’t make him finish, Mo Ran wanted to shout. How *dare* they? How dare they march in here, when Chu Wanning was so ill? How dare Nangong Si demand the truth from him, and then deny it?

“You had gone to your grandmother’s,” Chu Wanning was saying. “It was my graduation. Your mother had made the Eight Great Bowls for me… We’d drunk baijiu, a bottle between us, but we weren’t drunk. I’ve never seen anyone able to hold their drink like your mother could.”

“She *was* drunk,” Nanging Si hissed. “She had been drinking – with *you* – and that’s why she fell!”

“No. Neither of us were drunk. You know that your father had been delaying the divorce, don’t you? He kept refusing to sign the papers. He’d come around to her house, under the pretext of picking something up, but he’d always have forgotten the papers. And then he would try to beat her down, until she threw him out.”

“They separated, for a while, but they were reconciling-”

“A-Si,” Chu Wanning said. Mo Ran could hear the exhaustion in his voice. “He’d had an affair with Qi Liangji. Your mother would never have been able to move past that. You knew her better than anyone. It was your father who refused to accept it. He kept trying to coerce her, to take him back, but her face would never allow it. He came around that night as well, and- We both knew how he could be. She didn’t want me to witness another argument, or more begging. I wanted to help her save face. I went up to the bathroom, but something… I knew something was wrong. He wasn’t trying to persuade her. He was silent. He was never silent… He went upstairs, and she followed, and then he pushed her.”

Nangong Si’s face was white. “You’d better have some fucking proof.”

“I don’t. I didn’t see it. But that’s what happened.”

“She *tripped*.”

“She didn’t. He pushed her. I came out as she was falling, I was-“ Chu Wanning’s voice finally cracked, like the frozen surface of a lake. “I was too late. Her head went into the wall, her neck snapped-”

“Shut up!”

“No. You wanted to know,” he said, with a shadow of his old ruthlessness. “What I mean is, it was quick. She was dead before I could get down the stairs. I rang 120, but I couldn’t… I couldn’t speak. Sometimes I… can’t speak. But the phone was recording, and I held it out. To show your father. And he nodded at me.”

Chu Wanning wasn’t looking at Nangong Si anymore. He’d retreated into himself, eyes dark and blank. “I thought he was going to kill me too. And he knew that I was thinking that, and that… The emergency operator recording the call, that was the only thing that saved me, I think. We could already hear the sirens, but I couldn’t… When the paramedics arrived, and the police, I couldn’t speak. I tried to tell them that it was *him*, that Nangong Liu had killed her, but I… I wasn’t… myself. I was…”

Mo Ran thought of Chu Wanning, during the mugging. The way that he had frozen when he saw the knife going for Mo Ran’s chest.

“Then more police arrived. Wearing suits. Just like you. They locked me in the back of the police car.”

“They arrested you?” Ye Wangxi asked.

“No. They locked me in the back of the police car. They were talking to Nangong Liu. They let him go in the ambulance with her. She was already dead, but I presume bringing her to the hospital gave them an excuse to mess up the crime scene, I don’t know.”

“What were their names?” Nangong Si demanded.

“Li and Chen.”

“Numbers?”

“I don’t know.”

“Characters?”

“I don’t know.”

“First names?”

“I don’t know.”

Nangong Si’s mouth was twisted. “So just Li and Chen. Right. Of course. Did they show you their badges?”

“No.”

“How do you even know they were really police?”

“They spoke to the officers in uniform. They arrived in a police car. It was a logical extrapolation.”

“A logical- Right! Sure! You fucking *machine*-”

Mo Ran had had enough; he gripped the back of Nangong Si’s collar and hauled him up out of the chair.

“Mo Ran!”

“You stupid- I’m arresting you, you piece of shit-”

“No, you’re not,” Ye Wangxi said, breaking Mo Ran’s grip with a well-practiced flick of her wrist. She shoved him away, and then hauled Nangong Si back. “Calm down. No one’s arresting anyone.”

“He assaulted me-!”

“I’ll do more than that, you stupid motherfuck-”

“*Mo Ran*,” Chu Wanning said from the bed. The edge in his voice cut through the air of aggression, and they all turned to look at him. “Don’t you *dare* finish that word.”

Mo Ran struggled to rein himself in. “Right. Shit. Of course. I’m sorry.”

“And to Officer Nangong.”

Mo Ran cocked his head disbelievingly, but even wedged between pillows, Chu Wanning’s eyes were utterly merciless.

“Sorry.”

Nangong Si was looking at Mo Ran with absolute loathing, but he seemed somewhat mollified. He shrugged Ye Wangxi's hand off his shoulder.

"They were police," Chu Wanning continued, as though nothing had interrupted them. "As distasteful as you may find that, being part of their number. Once the ambulance and your father had gone, they got into the car with me. I told them that Nangong Liu had murdered your mother. They asked why, and I told them – instead of a disgraced adulterer, now he was a tragic widower, with all of her money, and full custody of their son. But they didn't seem to grasp it. I couldn't understand why they seemed so resistant to the idea. I asked whether they were stupid or corrupt. One of them said that if they were corrupt, they weren't the ones being stupid…"

Mo Ran couldn't breathe. He'd thought that Chu Wanning's distrust of the police came from a similar place as his own, but he never could have dreamt of this.

"Before the letters. I just don't trust them. The police serve the interests of those in authority, those with power, not ordinary people. I don't want anything to do with them, any of them."

"Then they said what you said. That I had been drunk. So drunk that I couldn't speak. So drunk that I could only… 'make animal noises'." Chu Wanning bit out the words. "Then they intimated that your mother and I were sleeping together, and that she had broken up with me, to reconcile with your father."

"What the *fuck*?" He knew he shouldn't interrupt again, but Mo Ran couldn't help himself.

"How old were you?" Ye Wangxi asked.

"Sixteen. It wouldn't have been illegal, but obviously her reputation would be… They implied that a jury would find it easy to believe that I had killed her. I'm autistic. And because my own… Because I'd been in one of the state orphanages, and had a family history of violence."

A family history of violence. Blood was pounding in Mo Ran's ears. If he didn't sit down soon, he was going to faint.

"I didn't understand what they meant, at first. I didn't… It made no sense, and I was… In those days, I wasn't always able to understand hints. Subtext. A machine, no? They kept calling your father *President* Nangong, saying that *he* had been the one in the bathroom, and then when I realised why, I tried to get out again, but the doors were… I couldn't breathe." Chu Wanning's jaw was tight; he was clenching it against something. "I couldn't breathe, but they wouldn't let me out. They made me admit that I hadn't actually *seen* him push her. They still wouldn't let me out. They drove me to my room. They brought me up, with their hands on my shoulders. They made sure I knew they knew where I lived."

Nangong Si was shaking his head. "If this is- I'm not saying it's true. But if it's true, why the *fuck* didn't you tell anyone? Why didn't you tell anyone else?!"

Mo Ran wanted to throw these bastards out. He wanted to shield Chu Wanning from their questions and the memories. He wanted to go back in time and *murder* these men.

"I was scared," Chu Wanning said quietly. "I was sixteen."

Chapter 22: Rescue from the Underworld

Chapter Summary

▶ This chapter is very heavy and very dark, with themes of self-harm and emotional distress. Detailed spoilers and content warnings HERE:

The two police were arguing outside the room, too low to hear their words, only their tones: Nangong desperate, Ye placatory.

Chu Wanning had passed out, exhausted from his verbal over-exertion. Mo Ran knew such openness didn't come easily to him – he doubted it would have come at all without the heroic dose of morphine he was on.

But it wasn't just the drugs, he thought, looking down at Chu Wanning's bruised, cut face. What was it? An exorcism? Secrets held for too long, trauma upon trauma inflicted on a gentle child who had believed in things like *law* and *justice*. Who had honestly thought that people were reasonable and good and selfless, even after his own father had buried a knife in his chest.

Was it just Nangong Si's presence that had unlocked all of that? A ghost from the past?

Mo Ran couldn't even imagine knowing Chu Wanning as a teenager. He had *seen* that video of the child playing the guqin, and yet some part of him still thought that Chu Wanning had simply woken up one day, fully formed, like a statue coming to life.

But it wasn't that either. Something had changed within Chu Wanning. Some switch had been hit, or some cog removed. It hadn't been so much of a *sharing* as a… *leaking*. The truth leaking out of something too broken to hold it any more.

He wasn't making any sense, even to himself. His brain had been poisoned by engineering, clearly.

The door behind him opened. Mo Ran turned to see Nangong Si marching down the corridor, and Ye Wangxi peeking in.

"How is he?"

"Exhausted." Ye Wangxi had been the kinder of the two, but that hadn't been saying much.

"I'm sorry," she said, and she sounded sincere. It made Mo Ran's lip curl.

"He was too ill for this. Your mate doesn't even care that someone tried to blow him to hell a few days ago."

"He does. He used to worship Chu Wanning."

"*Worship* doesn't mean *care about*. Worshipping just means you're disappointed when someone inevitably acts like a human being."

"He *does* care about him. But he's… not been himself, since he got that letter about his father. It threw him."

"Oh, right, yeah," Mo Ran said. "Oh, in that case, it's all fine. Of all the people who've received upsetting things in the mail recently, he's clearly suffered the most."

Ye Wangxi's lip quirked at that. "Touché. … I know it doesn't excuse his behaviour-"

"Or yours."

"Or mine. But he… He's not so bad, normally. He's a good person."

“He’s a cop.”

“A good one. Not like those men Dr. Chu told us about.”

“Really?” Mo Ran finally stood to face her properly. “Because if I heard him correctly, *those* two officers used their authority to browbeat and bully him when he was helpless and traumatised, and you and *A-Si*, oh, right, yeah, used your authority to browbeat and bully him when he was helpless and traumatised. He can’t fucking *move*. He couldn’t escape from the back of that car, and he couldn’t escape you here, and Nangong used that to his advantage until he got the answers he wanted. He might not be a murderer – though you’re cops, so who fucking knows? – but he’s as big a piece of shit as his father, and you’re the police officer who lets him get away with it.”

Ye Wangxi didn’t reply. Mo Ran turned away in disgust, and part of that disgust was at himself. What right did he have, to sound so self-righteous? To act as though he was so loyal? These two idiots might have been a pair of bullies with badges, but he was the one Chu Wanning had trusted the most, and the one who had betrayed that trust most cruelly.

His head *ached*. He could feel his blood pounding, veins and arteries throbbing against the broken bone. His little spiel had strained his traumatised lungs, and he was wheezing now, trying to stand despite the pain clenching his lower ribs.

None of it hurt nearly as much as Chu Wanning’s slack face.

“Just fuck off,” he said to Ye Wangxi. “Just… please. Just fuck off.”

*

Something was wrong. Something was deeply, agonisingly *wrong*.

It was Chu Wanning. The doctors were pleased with his progress. They said that he would soon he well enough for skin grafts, and then, in a month or so, reconstructive surgery on his shoulder.

Chu Wanning hadn't been able to nod, but he had smiled mildly, and thanked them for all their hard work and care.

Xue Zhengyong had searched high and low for a post-explosion rehab clinic which wasn't linked to the military, and had eventually found one in Shanghai. He'd said that of course he would pay for it all, and that Chu Wanning's job would be waiting for him when he returned in a few months.

Chu Wanning had thanked him too, and agreed to go to the rehab clinic with the docility of a lamb. He had then thanked him for the trust that Xue Zhengyong had placed in him, for his unwavering support and kindness, and for being such a good friend.

He had finally seen Xue Meng, and told him that he must not feel the least bit guilty for not being there when the bomb went off. That Chu Wanning was glad that he was safe, and so very proud of his performance in the National Robotics Championship. That he was proud of everything that Xue Meng had achieved, and that he knew he would continue to work hard while he was away.

No one else seemed to realise how worrying this was, and what could Mo Ran say? That Chu Wanning was being too reasonable? That he was being serene and emotionally open and humble and grateful? That he was agreeing to expensive recovery plans without argument or shame?

He wanted to *scream*.

How could no one *see* it? How could no one realise how out-of-character this was? Everyone seemed *so happy* that Chu Wanning was doing so well, and only Mo Ran seemed to feel the gaping void of terror opening up beneath him.

The doctors said that he could be discharged tomorrow, as long as he went back to the Xues to recover properly. He didn't want to leave the hospital. Ya'an was three hours away from Wuchang – how much longer would they stay there, to be able to visit Chu Wanning daily? When was he going to be going to Shanghai? Mo Ran had the ridiculous urge to go with him.

Chu Wanning asked for him that evening, after the Xues had left for the night, and Mo Ran went in with the air of a firefighter entering a blaze. Entering that laboratory, full of compressed gases and fuel, glass and shrapnel crunching under his feet, slipping on the trail of blood.

Chu Wanning smiled at him dazedly, and it was *wrong* – something alien, something drugged, something learnt from a book and pasted on like a mask. It was distressed and fake and it fucking killed him.

"Hey," he said gently, sitting down in Chu Wanning's eyeline. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Better. A little stronger. Just very tired, still."

"Have you heard from our friends in Beijing?"

"Nn. No. But it's all right." Chu Wanning blinked slowly. "It's up to Nangong Si now, what he does with it. I don't know if there's anything that he *can* do, but I'm glad he finally knows." He looked anxiously at Mo Ran. "You probably think it was irresponsible of me, letting a boy live with a murderer. But he… I knew Nangong Liu would never hurt his son. If I had, I'd have fought it, even if it meant prison."

"I know, I know," Mo Ran said. He knew that Chu Wanning couldn't feel his hand on his, so he reached across and stroked Chu Wanning's hair behind his ear instead.

Chu Wanning's eyes flew wide open. Something trembled in his face, some spasm of agony and fear, and then it was gone again, visibly pushed back under the surface.

“I didn’t want you to think I’d endanger a child.”

“I *don’t*.”

Chu Wanning was studying his face. “Even though I endangered you? And Xue Meng?”

“You didn’t. In terms of risks, trusting me with heavy machinery was always going to be higher up the ranks.” Mo Ran smiled. “We’re not idiots, and not children. We all knew about the court case. And you let me see all those threats.”

There was another crack, another glimmer of emotion, and another forced smoothing of Chu Wanning’s expression. He wasn’t meeting Mo Ran’s eyes, but was instead letting his gaze drift all over his face.

Mo Ran didn’t know what to *do.* “Please try not to worry about it, Chu-*laoshi*.”

He’d made a mistake. Chu Wanning’s eyes snapped to his own, and his expression wasn’t serene any longer; it was hard and opaque.

“I’ll try not to, Mo Ran. You’re… very kind.”

“I’m really, *really* not. I’m a shithead.”

“Don’t. You’re kind. You’re *good*.” Another spasm. Another girding. Mo Ran felt as though the pressure in the air had forced all the oxygen from his bruised lungs. “I’m glad that you know, about Rong Yan. Whatever A-Si decides to do, I’m glad that someone else knows.”

“Chu-*laoshi*… Do you want me to *do* anything? I can tell someone else. We might be able to track down those police officers…”

“No. No. It’s up to Nangong Si now.” Chu Wanning was studying his face again. “Mo Ran… I… I’m sorry. I was so strict with you. I should have been kinder.”

He couldn’t *breathe*. “You *have* been kind. You’re the kindest person I know. You’ve helped me so much.” Mo Ran could taste his own fear in the back of his throat. “Why are you saying this?”

“I might not see you for a while,” Chu Wanning said quietly. “If I’m going to Shanghai. I won’t be there to help you with your exams. I won’t be there to see you graduate… Xue Meng will help you, if you need it. And you need to look after him. I’m…”

Chu Wanning’s mouth twisted. His next words came out in a whisper. “I haven’t been the teacher you deserved, Mo Ran. I’ve been… You deserved better than me.”

Chu Wanning swam in front of him, and Mo Ran shook his head. “Impossible.”

“I’ve burdened you. I endangered you. And I…”

Chu Wanning paused for a moment. He struggled with something, something that made his jaw tight and his gaze forlorn. Then he sighed. “None of what’s happened is your fault, Mo Ran. You’re being discharged tomorrow, and I… I just need you to know that. All right? None of it.”

“Please,” Mo Ran choked. “Please don’t.”

Chu Wanning stopped. “All right. All right…” He closed his eyes. “I’m tired now. I need to sleep.”

Mo Ran swiped at his eyes, and stood up. His legs were unsteady beneath him. “Yeah. I’ll… I’m just next door. You’ll be okay?”

“Mn.” Chu Wanning didn’t open his eyes. “Good night, Mo Ran. May you have a good dream…”

Mo Ran did not have a good dream. Mo Ran did not sleep. He lay awake, staring at the ceiling, dread lodged in his throat, as the minutes ticked by, and with every one that did, he felt it more and more strongly: the urge in the back of his mind to get up, get *up*, before it was too late!

He couldn’t articulate what was wrong, but he knew that it *was* wrong, that there was danger. He hadn’t felt it on the morning of the bomb, but he felt it now. Every beat of his heart felt faster, felt deeper; there was ice-water where his spinal fluid should have been, and his lungs were full of shards of glass.

The shift changed, and then the noise died down again. Midnight. One o’clock. It was finally too much to bear; Mo Ran swung himself out of bed, put on his sliders, and went next door to check on Chu Wanning.

The bed was empty.

He’d been expecting it, somehow. The terror sharpened into razorblades, bringing total clarity. He pulled on the alarm cord, and looked around with hawk eyes.

There, on the linoleum. A dark line, an edge of… Mo Ran bent down, and close-to, it was unmistakable.

Bare toes, outlined in blood.

He found another, the same foot, and then another. And then another, by the door to the fire stairs.

He’d never run so fast in his life. He took the stairs two at a time, then three, flinging himself around the corners using the banister as a pivot.

The door onto the roof was ajar. The blast of February fresh air flooded his lungs, the first he had tasted in over a week. The glow of the town turned the sky brown, but directly above him it was still black.

Chu Wanning stood at the very edge of the hospital roof, shins braced against the low wall that ran around it. His hair was loose, tangled and uneven, one hank cut to his neck by his left shoulder. He was wearing only a hospital gown, pale blue and tied down the back.

His hands were swaddled, looking like grotesque mittens. His knees had thick dressings on them, and his gown hung strangely on his left shoulder due to all the padding there. He was swaying.

"Chu-*laoshi*…"

He glanced over his shoulder and closed his eyes in despair. "Not you. Please, *please,* not *you*. Go downstairs, Mo Ran."

"What are you doing? What are you-? Come- come back from the edge a bit."

Chu Wanning shook his head. "You need to go downstairs."

Mo Ran carefully took a step forward. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You have to."

"Why? Why do I have to?"

"Because-" Chu Wanning staggered, dangerously, and the entire world slowed down. "Because if you… if you see it, or find the body, you're more likely to hurt yourself later."

The body. The body. “Body? Why-” Mo Ran licked his lips. “Why would I be finding a body?”

“I’m… very tired, Mo Ran.” Chu Wanning looked down at his mittened hands. “Couldn’t tie a knot. But I don’t want anyone to… I had to find a quiet place. A lonely place. I was trying to- Trying to see which side had the fewest lit windows. So no one had to see.”

Mo Ran was inching forwards, agonisingly slowly. Sweat prickled in his hair; he could already feel it pouring down his back. “Chu-*laoshi*-”

“Don’t call me that!”

Chu Wanning’s voice cracked with pain, and Mo Ran stopped, held up his hands.

“Okay. I won’t. Shizun.”

Chu Wanning turned away again. *Shizun* was apparently acceptable. “You have to go inside.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Just- just talk to me. Yeah? It’s just me.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. He was shaking. Mo Ran had no idea how he was upright; the pain he had to be in was incomprehensible. “I’m just so tired.”

“I know. I know. Come inside and you can sleep. It’s cold out here…”

“Cold…” Chu Wanning’s left arm hung uselessly at his side. A dark stain was growing, seeping through the bandages and the gown. “I’ve always been cold. Everyone always said… But I’m not.” He turned around to look at Mo Ran. His eyes were full of tears, but even now

he was blinking, trying to prevent them from falling; even now, he tried to cling to his self-restraint. “I don’t mean to be. But I- I’m no good, Mo Ran.”

“Of course you are. Of course you’re good.”

He turned away, scoffing. “You don’t know. If you knew, you’d be *disgusted*. I’m *disgusting*.” Chu Wanning sniffed. “I didn’t want you to see this. I didn’t want anyone to see me.”

“I’m seeing it now. Seeing you now.” Mo Ran took another step, so gentle, so quiet. His legs screamed in protest.

“I don’t want that.” Chu Wanning peered down, and Mo Ran resisted the urge to run forward. “I don’t want anyone to see me. I don’t want- I can’t *do it anymore*-”

“Hey, it's okay, I know. I know. You’re tired.”

“Tired… I’m tired of…” Chu Wanning’s breath hitched involuntarily, and as his shoulders moved, he cried out in pain. “I just want to go somewhere where people don’t hate me!”

Mo Ran had never felt pain like this. He wanted to fall to his knees in the dirty water of the roof and kiss Chu Wanning’s long, white feet. “I don’t hate you. I don’t hate you.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “You should!”

“I don’t. I never will. I could never hate you. You’re… you’re my friend.”

“*Friend*.” Chu Wanning said it like it was a vulgarity. “I nearly killed you.”

“You didn’t. You saved my life. I nearly killed *you*.”

Chu Wanning shook his head again.

Another step forward. “So. For the moment we’ll agree to disagree on that one… I need you to stay, Shizun. I need you to keep saving me, you see.”

“Stop it!” Chu Wanning pressed his hands over his ears. “*Please*, Mo Ran, just- just go away! Go away, *please*!”

“I’m not going away.”

Chu Wanning made a noise of frustration. “I don’t know what to do!”

Another painful step. “Just come down with me-”

“And what then? Wait for the next bomb? Wait for the next time the people I care about are endangered because of me? Another-”

Chu Wanning hid his face in the crook of his elbow, chest heaving with his sobs, and Mo Ran took the opportunity to glide forward, as quickly and quietly as he could.

“I don’t know how to be different! I don’t know how to stop making people hate me!”

Mo Ran sprinted now, speaking would only give his position away, and as Chu Wanning brought his arm down Mo Ran enveloped him, pulling him away from the ledge.

“Let go of me!”

Mo Ran could feel inches of dressing on Chu Wanning's back, and didn't understand how he could still be standing. Chu Wanning tried for a moment to push him away, and then collapsed, weeping against Mo Ran's shoulder. "Please, please, Mo Ran, *please*…"

Mo Ran's throat felt like a vice; he felt like he could cry blood, and never stop. He wanted to scream until his voice broke.

"I'm sorry," he cried into Chu Wanning's hair. "I'm so sorry. Please come back with me, please, Wanning, please…"

"It hurts…!"

"I know. I know. I know."

"It *hurts*! I can feel it! I'm human too! Every one of those letters hurts, every time someone- every time I remember- A-Si was angry and he didn't, didn't believe me- every time someone hates me - it hurts every time, it hurts *all the time*, I'm human too, I can *feel it*-"

How he restrained himself from crushing Chu Wanning, he'd never know. His body was kinder than his mind was. "I know you do. I know you do… I was so stupid. It was all me. I was wrong. I don't hate you. I'll never hate you. Please just come back with me, I'll do anything you say, you can shout at me all you like-"

This redoubled Chu Wanning's sobs. Mo Ran could feel the wetness in the crook of his neck, feel the heat of his panting, anguished breath. A child's promises were all he could offer.

"I'll bring you sweets every day. I'll bring that- that honey tea with the rose petals that you like."

Chu Wanning shook his head, rubbing his forehead against the side of Mo Ran's throat. "The mug's broken!"

"I'll buy you a new mug. A better mug. I'll buy you osmanthus cakes and lotus crisps and Vitasoy, the chocolate ones, and- and please just- please stay with me. Please, god, please. Let's start over, okay? Can we just… Can we start over?"

"I'm so tired, Mo Ran," Chu Wanning whispered against his skin, curled up as tight against him as a child. "I don't know how to… I'm so tired of everyone hating me. Everyone, all my life. I don't know what I did, when I was small, to make... I'm so tired…"

"Nothing. You did nothing. You're so good, you're *so good*, they don't understand it. Don't understand you. It's not your fault. Never your fault."

Chu Wanning made a small sound against him, like an animal whimpering in pain. Mo Ran Ran stepped back, and it was though his heart started beating again when Chu Wanning stepped with him.

"They'll lock me up. They'll tie me to a bed…"

"They won't. I'll never let them. Just… You have to promise, shizun. Wanning. Promise you'll stay with me, okay?"

Chu Wanning shuddered. He was growing heavier and heavier against Mo Ran, exhausted and in pain. "Stay… Mo Ran, it hurts…"

Mo Ran knew he didn't mean his wounds. "I know. I'm being selfish. Look after me. Stay with me. I know you won't break your promise."

Chu Wanning sighed. He stopped, like a lotus with his bare feet in a filthy puddle of rainwater. His eyes, as he looked up at Mo Ran, were red-rimmed and low-lidded.

The sight of him broke Mo Ran’s heart.

“I promise.”

Chapter 23: The Land of the Living

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time they reached the fire escape, Chu Wanning was a dead weight in Mo Ran's arms, and his traumatised lungs were beginning to complain sharply. He looked down and tried to see whether he could carry Chu Wanning, but that wicked expanse of raw flash across his back was already bleeding again, and Mo Ran didn't think the added pressure of his arm would help it.

So instead he threw Chu Wanning up over his shoulder like a sack of rice, and took a second to tug down the hem of the hospital gown to protect his modesty.

"It's just for a minute, shizun," he said, trying to laugh, trying to smile at the thought of how *outraged* Chu Wanning would be by this undignified scene.

Better to think of him raging than to think of him sobbing, pressed against the rim of the roof, swaying and seeking a darkened wall, a void to fall into.

I don't know how to be different. I don't know how to stop making people hate me.

The fireman's lift made it much, much easier – Mo Ran could happily perform overhead shoulder presses of far more than what Chu Wanning weighed, and could deadlift twice his weight without breaking a sweat. Even with a concussion and barotrauma he could safely hurry them down the stairs at a trot.

He wanted to throw it in Xue Meng's face. But then his heart sank again. If lifting Chu Wanning was so easy, how the hell could Chu Wanning have carried him so far? How could he have done it so injured?

He felt sick.

There were nurses waiting for them in the corridor; one was dithering, but the sister looked furious.

"Where was he?!"

"What do you mean, *Where was he*?" Mo Ran snapped. "You should *know.*"

The sister took the rebuke with pressed lips, but no argument. "It's the night shift, we're understaffed-"

"Useless." Mo Ran brought Chu Wanning down as carefully as he could, while the two nurses tugged the bed into shape for him to be placed back in his half-prone position. "He had a nightmare. He thought there was a bomb in the hospital. He was trying to find someone to warn and went into the stairwell."

"His feet are dirty," the sister said.

"Shows how filthy the stairwell is, doesn't it? I know it's not on the ward, but really!" Mo Ran hoped his anger would dissuade any further questioning. "He opened his shoulder again. I'll clean his feet, you deal with that."

He found wipes and tried to focus on the task at hand. The voices of the nurses, and the doctor they called, droned in his ears like hornets. The buzzing remained in his head, caught between his brain and his skull, when he went back into his own room and climbed into his bed.

What if he'd been a few minutes later? What if he hadn't got out of bed and investigated?

He'd thought that Chu Wanning was utterly indomitable. A being a stone and ice, carved instead of born. He thought that he'd *enjoyed* everyone being so afraid of his temper, so intimidated by his intelligence and demeanour.

But Mo Ran had begun to see through that, hadn't he? He'd realised months ago that so much of Chu Wanning's prickliness was a shield, to protect himself from unkindness or humiliation. Like the spines of a hedgehog. He'd known that the man had the thinnest face of anyone he'd ever met. But even he hadn't realised that things were so bad.

Was it any surprise? His own father had tried to kill him – and for what? For disagreeing with him? For wanting to help people? Then to witness his own supervisor murdered, and to be threatened with being framed for it… No wonder he was so careful with his own reputation. His supervisor had been friendly to him, drinking with him and making him meals, and the police had painted it as a sexual relationship. So he was cold and aloof to his own students, and all the time one had been planning on seducing him to destroy his oh-so-precious reputation, and the other… the other had assaulted him.

It was no wonder he relied so much on the shields of distance and iciness. They were the only defences he thought he had. Chu Wanning thought that he was completely alone, he thought that he had to face every cruelty life threw at him *completely alone*.

Not anymore.

For the first time since the bomb had gone off the stone in Mo Ran's throat dissolved. His heart cracked open. And he wept.

*

He must have cried himself to sleep, because the next thing he was conscious of was Xue Meng's voice slicing through his aching head with all the melodic grace of a chainsaw.

"What the fuck did you do?"

"What did *I* do?" Mo Ran said groggily, blinking in the morning sunlight. "What?"

“I *know* you had something to do with it. Chu-*laoshi*’s refusing to go to Shanghai.”

Mo Ran blinked and sat up. “What? He is?”

“Yes! He was *fine* yesterday, and now he’s- first of all, he doesn’t want to see anyone, and then when Dad went in to talk about Shanghai he said he wasn’t going. *Why the fuck are you smiling*?!”

“Just…” Mo Ran said, unable to stop. “He’s saying it’s too expensive?”

“I knew it,” Xue Meng said, narrowing his eyes. “I knew you had something to do with it!”

“No, no, just something he said last night,” Mo Ran said, swinging his legs out of the bed. “How is he?”

“He looks like *shit*. His shoulder’s all fucked again, and he’s snapping at everyone.”

“He had a bad dream last night. Dreamt there was a bomb in the hospital, went to try to find someone, got stuck in the stairwell,” Mo Ran said, remembering his lie from the night before.

Chu Wanning was refusing to go to Shanghai. Mo Ran knew he’d acquiesced so easily because he’d already known he’d not be going. He’d thanked Xue Zhengyong for his friendship under the guise of thanking him for the medical stay because it’d have to be a damn good rehab clinic if it could bring someone back from the dead. Now, if he was refusing… it was because it was a real possibility.

He was keeping his promise.

Mo Ran’s chest burnt, and he wanted to cry again. But he couldn’t stop smiling.

“Are you all right?” Xue Meng was looking at him oddly. “I know you’ve got a concussion, but you’re grinning like an idiot.”

“Just… relieved he’s all right. I found him. Let me go and speak to him.”

Xue Meng scoffed. “You can *try*.”

Chu Wanning had narrowed his eyes, snarling like a cat. “Not you too! Everyone’s haranguing me, trying to badger me! If I don’t want to go to Shanghai, then I won’t! You can take your money and shove it. *You wipe that smile off your face*, Mo Ran, this is all your fault!”

“Yuheng!” Xue Zhengyong had said in shock.

Mo Ran shook his head, beaming. “No, he’s right, it is. I’ll get you something nice from the vending machine, then we can talk about Shanghai, okay?”

“Get something from- Mo Ran, don’t you dare!” Chu Wanning tried to shout.

“Something sweet,” Mo Ran said, winking at him, and then winking again at his uncle.

Xue Zhengyong stared back at him incredulously.

Mo Ran whistled as he walked down the corridor to the vending machine in the floor’s waiting room. Chu Wanning was being a little bitch again, which meant that the world had returned to its true axis. Let him be irritable, let him be snappy, let him be annoying, let him hiss and claw like a cat dunked into a bathtub.

It all meant that he was alive.

He was trying to make up his mind between a packet of Hong Yuan Guava Candies or White Rabbits; he decided on the latter, remembering that they were the ones that Chu Wanning had kept in his pocket. He turned to bend down to retrieve the packet from the vending slot, and saw a man speaking to the sister at the end of the corridor, near their rooms.

He was a tall man, thin and bald, wearing the long black *haiqing* of a Buddhist monk and a set of moon-and-star Bodhi beads looped around his wrist. He was too far away for Mo Ran to see his expression, and the television in the waiting room was too loud to hear what they were saying.

He picked up the packet of sweets and began to walk back down the corridor.

Then he heard the rare but deep tone of anger from his uncle, and he *ran*.

"I have the right to be here," the monk was saying. "I'm his father – Wanning, I've come all this way-"

Mo Ran grabbed the back of the man's robes and *pulled*; yanking him from the doorframe was much easier than dragging Nangong Si out of his chair. He hadn't woken up expecting to murder a septuagenarian monk today, but he'd be lying if he said that the thought didn't fill him a bone-deep satisfaction.

He vaguely registered the sound of the sister telling him to stop, then calling for security. Mo Ran ignored her. He hauled Huaizui into the corridor and sent him sprawling on the floor.

"You'd dare come here?" he asked, advancing on the old man. "How can you have the fucking *face* to come here?"

He could hear a sound from Chu Wanning's room – not a shout, not his name, but a noise of frustration and pain.

Mo Ran had heard it once before: When Chu Wanning had been unable to speak, the day after Mo Ran had drugged him, and he had seen the vomit down the front of his jumper. Chu Wanning had looked up at him in shame and fear after it had escaped his mouth, and Mo Ran had instinctively known not to mention it, not to refer to it at all.

But it meant that he couldn't speak. Chu Wanning had been able to eloquently, subtly bid goodbye to them all, and then had been able to explain his method of suicide. But a single glance at his adopted father, and his words had all been snatched away.

Mo Ran drew his foot back to kick him, *longing* for the crack of ribs beneath his feet, but he was pulled back himself by the surprisingly strong grip of his uncle.

"Ran'er!"

Mo Ran tried to pull free, but he'd not slept well, and he had spent a week lying in bed with a fractured skull. "You don't know what he did-!"

"I know *exactly* what he did," Xue Zhengyong said. "He deserves to still be in prison. *You do not*."

Mo Ran drew a painful, glass-splintered breath into his lungs. Prison. If he was in prison for murdering this piece of shit, how could he help Chu Wanning? How could he protect him? Huaizui wasn't the only threat.

He didn't look like much of a threat right now at all, to be honest. Huaizui wasn't just thin, he was skeletal, and his breath was coming out in the same wheezing pants as Mo Ran's.

He was holding out his hand. "Wait – just wait."

Mo Ran could hear Chu Wanning from inside the room, making those same questioning noises of distress; he guessed that one of the nurses must be holding him down. "Stay there," he growled at Huaizui, and doubled back into the room.

Chu Wanning was indeed trying to get up from the bed. Mo Ran went right to his side, and cradled his face in his hands.

"We're fine. We're fine, okay? We're just going to see what he wants, and then he'll go."

Chu Wanning made a irritated noise of disapproval. His face was twisted.

"One second," Mo Ran promised. "Just one second. My uncle's right there."

Ignoring Chu Wanning was physically painful, but he went out into the corridor again. Huaizui had struggled to his feet; Mo Ran was pleased to see that his uncle had apparently not helped him at all.

Huaizui drew an audibly painful breath; they could hear it bubbling past the phlegm in his throat. "I just want to see him. Please."

"Not a *fucking* chance," Mo Ran said. "How did you know he was here?"

"I saw it on the news."

"On the *news*? Wow. Didn't know they watched the news in Buddhist monasteries. Or are you a grifter who just wears the robes?"

"I'm a monk," Huaizui said. "I became one in prison."

"Not much else to do."

“Let him speak, Ran'er,” Xue Zhengyong said, but Mo Ran could see the quirk of a smile on his face.

“I’m here to help,” Huaizui said. He was wearing a linen satchel, and he pulled a sheath of papers from it.

“You’d help best by fucking off and dying.”

“I am,” he replied. He paused, waiting for the impact of his words to sink in, and drew himself up into a dignified image of wounded stoicism. “I… I wanted to tell him. I have cancer.”

“I hope it’s painful,” Mo Ran said, without hesitation.

Huaizui looked at him, and there it was. Mo Ran had been subconsciously looking for it, *prodding* for it, and for just a second, there was a killing rage in the monk’s eyes.

Mo Ran recognised it. He too was capable of it.

“It is. But it’s nothing less than what I deserve,” Huaizui said, staring right back at Mo Ran. “As you clearly know…”

“We both know who you are,” Xue Zhengyong said. “And what you did. What is it?”

“Money,” Huaizui said straightforwardly. “Chu Wanning’s money. I would have given it back to him earlier, but he refused all my attempts to contact him…”

“What money?”

“I know him. He won’t accept a single yuan from you,” Xue Zhengyong said.

“It’s not from me – well, in a sense.” Huaizui licked his lips. “He earnt a lot of money for us, when he was young. Interviews, television appearances, concerts, CDs, prize money, competitions. I remember one where he had to recite the *Shi Jing* when he was seven…”

He earnt. *Where he had to*. Contempt curdled in Mo Ran’s gut. Even now, the man wouldn’t admit who had been forcing Chu Wanning to do these things – to perform like a trained animal, like a dog remembering which cup the coin was under.

Mo Ran had been so angry – *so angry* – when he’d watched that video of an eleven-year-old Chu Wanning performing the guqin in his own filmed concert at the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing, with his little silk shirt and its little pankou knots and his little shaved head. And his big, adult-sized guqin.

He remembered thinking how haughty Chu Wanning had looked, the sneer he’d worn even when making his bows. His eyes never on the audience, always glancing somewhere offstage.

When he’d watched the video, he’d feel *sick* with rage at the sight: Chu Wanning at the NCPA, while at the same time, his mother had been busking to feed the freezing six-year-old child she kept hidden behind the alleyway dustbins.

He felt the same rage, but it was now directed completely at the pathetic man in front of him.

Because he knew Chu Wanning now. That cold, haughty expression on his face hadn’t been arrogance. It had been fear. He’d not been contemptuously ignoring his audience; he’d been scared of it, and he’d instead been looking for approval from Huaizui off-stage. He might have been performing in silk at the NPCA, but his motivation had been the same as his mother’s: forced to perform for food by people who didn’t give a damn about them.

“He preferred the one with the *Dao De Ching*,” Huaizui was saying, apparently oblivious to exactly how close to his death he was. But then he noticed Mo Ran’s eyes, and their

murderers' bond allowed him to recognise the look in them just as easily as Mo Ran had recognised his own. "He enjoyed them. He wanted to do them!"

"I bet he did," Mo Ran said, very quietly.

"They were easy for him. He always had a good memory."

Mo Ran thought of all the books in Chu Wanning's flat. How many times had people said that – *it's easy for him*? They were never the ones who saw his sheets and sheets of notes, who saw him skip meals, who saw him fall asleep at his desk, who saw him get sick over and over again. "Sure."

"I made some shrewd investments with it all. If he's as ill as he looks, he needs it."

"Oh, okay," said Mo Ran. "We see. Because you're dying now, so you don't need it anymore. Though I've bet you've kept some back for yourself, right?"

There was a flash of murder in Huaizui's eyes again. "I had to give up my job, to help him to reach his potential. You have no idea how much attention a child like that, with his condition, requires. Not just the education and the training, but the fussiness, the sulkiness, the neediness... Call it my pay as his manager," he said.

"His *manager*-" Mo Ran felt his uncle's warning hand on his shoulder again.

"I believe I've relinquished the right to call myself his father in your eyes," Huaizui said. He handed over the sheath of papers to Xue Zhengyong, and Mo Ran caught sight of the number on the first page.

His shock must have showed on his face, because Huaizui gave him a brittle smile. "As I said. I made some shrewd investments. And of course, they weren't touched for several years…" He handed over a sealed envelope. "I'd just ask that you give that to him as well. Perhaps you could ask him if he would see me-"

“No,” Mo Ran said. “He’s gone through enough. *You’ve* put him through enough. Do you even have the slightest idea- No. If he wants to talk to you, *ever*-”

If he physically could *ever talk to you.*

“- I’m sure he’ll be able to find you,” Xue Zhengyong said. “What with your criminal record and all.”

“My address is on the letter.” Huaizui was staring at Mo Ran. “But who are you? To be so protective…”

Mo Ran ground his teeth. “I’m his friend.”

“His *friend*. Well. I always had that suspicion as to his inclination, but never to his taste,” Huaizui said, and Xue Zhengyong really did have to hold Mo Ran back then.

The security guards, ludicrously late, stepped out of the lift. They looked confused as to whom they were meant to be escorting out. From the other direction, a doctor in a white coat was trotting down the corridor towards them.

“This man was just leaving,” Xue Zhengyong said. “And he’s not to enter again. There will probably be a court order that effect.”

“There’s no need. I’m leaving.” Hauizui looked again towards Chu Wanning’s door, and Mo Ran stepped in front of it.

“Good. I’ll make sure you do,” Xue Zhengyong said, and squeezed Mo Ran’s shoulder. “I’ll make sure security knows. You go in to him, Ran'er.”

Chapter End Notes

Shout-out to bittertwilight, who correctly predicted Huaizui's deus ex machina Forbidden Technique of Rebirth in this modern AU: CASH MONEY! 😭😂

Chapter 24: Old Thoughts, Old Habits

Chu Wanning's first emotion when he saw Huaizui standing in the doorway was relief.

He looked as skeletal as Baigujing's true form, but the new black robe instead made Chu Wanning think of Heibai – he just had Bodhi beads looped around his wrist, rather than a length of chain to drag the soul down to hell.

Chu Wanning still thought of things in these terms of ancient literature and mythology. He and Huaizui had never had a television, never listened to the radio – Huaizui had only brought a computer when it became obvious that Chu Wanning's education couldn't progress without one. Little art, no plants. A bare, empty place. But their house had been full of books of Chinese literature and religion, and it was there that Chu Wanning found beauty.

Huaizui was passionate to the point of aggression that he would raise Chu Wanning according to old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits. He would play the guqin, not the violin or the piano. All the books in their house were written in the traditional characters; if Chu Wanning accidentally wrote a simplified character, Huaizui would sharply slap his hand. He was allowed to read any book in the house save for those on one top shelf in Huaizui's study, the forbidden titles becoming tantalising to him: *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, *The State and Revolution*, *Imperialism: The Highest State of Capitalism*, *The Conquest of Bread*. A very small book with a bright red cover: *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*.

Huaizui's anger was never hot. It was a cold, icy thing, an anger of disappointment. But the day that Chu Wanning had asked if he could read any of the books on that top shelf, Huaizui's anger had been like fire and lightning, scorching in its intensity.

"You must never touch them!" he had shouted, fingers bruisingly tight around Chu Wanning's shoulders. "They are poison!"

"You're hurting me-!" Chu Wanning had said, looking up at Huaizui's twisted face.

Hauizui shook him again. “Those books killed your father! Those books killed-” He had blinked. Then he had stepped away, shoving Chu Wanning back as though he had transformed into a monster. “Get out! Go to your room!”

Chu Wanning had been young enough, new enough to Huaizui’s house, that when he was upset, the longed-for word still slipped out. “*Baba*…”

“I am not your *baba*! How dare you? How dare you ask for those books, and then-” Huaizui exhaled sharply through his nostrils, visibly trying to bring his rage under control. “Go to your room. Right now. I don’t want to *see* you.”

The next day, Chu Wanning had practiced the guqin incessantly; they were preparing for a competition the following week, for which the prize money would be fifty thousand yuan – a sum not to be sniffed at. Once Huaizui was satisfied with his performance, his little fingers aching, he’d risked the question. “Did you know my father?”

“What?” Huaizui stared at him. “Of course I didn’t. No one knows who he was. You were left in the snow under a tree by West Lake, near Jingci Temple. That’s why you’re called Wanning, because you were found at the ‘Evening Bell at Nanping Mountain’ spot. You were taken to the Hangzhou Children’s Welfare Institute. That’s all anyone knows. Maybe your mother didn’t even know who your father was.”

Chu Wanning didn’t know how that was possible, but he knew not to be distracted. “But… I know that’s why I’m Wanning, but I used to be Chang Wanning. We were all called Chang. Why is my surname Chu now? It’s not your surname.” Huaizui was always Huaizui to him, but Chu Wanning knew that his real surname was Xiao.

“You can go back there and be Chang Wanning again, if you like,” Huaizui said with quiet menace. “Do you want that?”

“No, no!” Chu Wanning said, and was quiet for a moment. But his curiosity got the better of him. “It’s just that… yesterday, you said that the books on the top shelf killed my father.”

Huaizui glared. “No, I didn’t.”

“You did. I heard you.”

“I did not, Wanning. Are you calling me a liar?”

“N-no. But I… I heard you.”

“You did *not* hear me. I didn’t say it. So are *you* lying to me?” His eyes narrowed. “Or are you hearing things that aren’t there? Are you insane?”

“No!”

“Do we need to go back to the doctor?”

Chu Wanning mutely shook his head.

“Good.”

Later, when Chu Wanning knew more about modern history, he began to develop a hypothesis. Huaizui was exactly the right age, after all. It was a hypothesis confirmed when he found the armband in the bottom drawer of Huaizui’s desk, faded and folded.

A Red Guard. A Buddhist monk. And now, Chu Wanning’s personal psychopomp.

That was the reason for his relief. He did not have to kill himself – Huaizui would do it for him. He would keep his promise to Mo Ran not to take his own life, but he wouldn’t have to endure any longer.

Then Mo Ran had pulled Huaizui out again, and all of his relief had turned into desperate terror.

He could barely hear what they were saying; his heart monitor was going crazy, and the nurses were trying to tell him to lie down again. His right arm gave out underneath him, and one of the nurses pressed on his back to keep him down.

He panicked.

His throat had closed up, but he had to warn Mo Ran; it was like the fear he had felt in the mugging, seeing that knife angled up towards Mo Ran's chest, but a thousand times worse, because it was *Huaizui*. He was really there, he was really in the corridor with Mo Ran, and he would kill him.

The noise that escaped from Chu Wanning was loud and harsh and inhuman; he struggled to get up, but he was so weak that the slight female nurse could hold him down with one hand. He didn't have any emotion spare to feel ashamed and embarrassed by the sound.

And then Mo Ran was there.

He crouched down beside the bed so that he could look straight into Chu Wanning's eyes, and then he held his face in both hands. They were so large, so warm, and even with Huaizui right outside the door, something settled deep in Chu Wanning's chest. This close, Mo Ran's eyes were huge and dark with that strange violet tint; his expression was open and comforting and confident.

"We're fine. We're fine, okay? We're just going to see what he wants, and then he'll go."

Chu Wanning tried to shake his head, but it just made him aware again of Mo Ran's firm touch. He tried to force out the words, that Huaizui was dangerous, that he would kill him, but his treacherous, useless voice was gone, and he could only make a noise again.

Mo Ran seemed to understand it anyway.

"One second. Just one second. My uncle's right there."

This was not the comfort that Mo Ran seemed to think it would be – Xue Zhengyong being present just meant another potential victim. He tried to push himself up again, tried to tell Mo Ran to come in and bar the door, to watch out for knives, to tell him- to *tell him*-

Then whatever the nurses had been putting into his IV drip began to weigh like lead in his veins.

A doctor came in, asking questions, looking at the ECG. Chu Wanning tried to hear what was being said in the corridor, but the words were beyond him. He could only properly hear the tones of voice – Huaizui bitter, venomous, and Mo Ran scathing and strong – and the odd snatch of words between the voices of the doctor and the nurses.

– *fucking off and dying* –

– *recite the* Shi Jing –

– *the fussiness, the sulkiness, the neediness* –

– *If he wants to talk to you,* ever –

– *suspicion as to his inclination, but never to his taste* –

He needed to warn Mo Ran. That was the certainty that eclipsed everything else, the humiliation so great he wanted to die, the devastation and the pain, the old fear that that word '*inclination*' sparked in his gut. He *needed* to…

And then, after agonising minutes, Mo Ran was there again, alive and unbloodied in front of him.

"I'm fine," he said, crouching by the bed again. He brought Chu Wanning's limp hand very gently to his chest. "Look. No stab wounds. We're all absolutely fine."

Some of the terror in Chu Wanning's chest unknotted. He blinked slowly.

Mo Ran nodded. "He won't come in again. He won't come in, and he didn't touch either of us. It's all right now."

Chu Wanning blinked again – it was somewhat longer this time. When he opened his eyes, the doctor was gone. As was the sunlight that had painted the wall.

But Mo Ran was still there, face lit from beneath by his phone.

Chu Wanning tried to clear his throat. "Was I asleep…?"

Mo Ran immediately put his phone down and smiled at him.

Oh, it was such a beautiful smile. Even pale, with purple smudges of tiredness under his eyes, he was so beautiful.

"They sedated you," Mo Ran said. "They were worried about your heart."

A little late for that. "Is he gone?" Anxiety spiked through him again. "Did he come back? Your uncle-"

“Uncle’s absolutely fine. He and Auntie and Xue Meng just went to get some dinner. They’ll be back any minute. And he’s not come back. They took a photo of him and will make sure all the security shifts know that he’s not allowed in.”

He couldn’t quite bring himself to believe it. He liked to think that Huaizui was already dead, or at least, *Not There Anymore*. The sure knowledge that Huaizui was in China, in Sichuan, in Ya’an, was almost overwhelming. “What did he want?”

“To see you.”

“I gathered that much,” Chu Wanning snapped with all the energy he could muster. He was exhausted, not stupid.

Mo Ran just smiled at him. “Right, sorry. He actually came to give you some money. Well. A shit-tonne of money.”

Something gripped his intestines like an iron vice. “I don’t want his money.”

“It’s not his. It’s yours. He invested all your prize money, CD money, whatever, all of that. He’s been living off it, but… It’s still a hell of a lot, shizun.”

“No… No, all my prize money, it all went to the lawyers. I don’t have any left.”

“No, it’s all the stuff from when you were a kid. All of that went straight to him, and he invested it. Obviously, he couldn’t touch it when he was in prison, and cumulative interest is a hell of a thing…”

“When I was a child…?” How he wished he could sit up. He hated this horrible prone position. “But why would he give it to me now? Because of the bomb?”

“Maybe, but… Um. He also said he’s dying. Cancer.”

There was something in his chest which had gently, timidly begun to bloom, and Mo Ran's words crushed it instantly. "Of course… He's using the rest of it to buy forgiveness."

"And he won't need it for much longer... Are you okay? Sorry. Dumb question."

Chu Wanning ignored it entirely. "How much is it? Your uncle… did he say…?"

"It'd cover a year in the clinic, if you needed it."

Oh, he was just so tired.

"You'll water my *penzai*," he said, not bothering to make it a request. If Mo Ran was going to coerce a promise to live from him, the least he could do was keep Chu Wanning's plants alive too.

*

The flight to Shanghai was actually the best Chu Wanning had ever taken, because he was solidly unconscious for the whole ordeal. He knew far too much about aeronautical engineering to ever feel entirely happy flying, even without the additional trials of being squeezed into a loud metal tube with a couple of hundred other people, all talking and coughing and sneezing and crying and snoring and breathing, with bright lights that couldn't be turned off and announcements that couldn't be ignored.

He saw nothing of Shanghai. He spent the majority of the first two and a half months asleep, either during surgery or recovering from it. A skin graft on his back, a tympanoplasty for his perforated eardrum, a scapulectomy and allograft reconstructions, followed by two more operations on his shoulder to give him back a full range of movement in time.

The police came, again and again and again, asking the same questions. They clearly knew nothing about who had sent the bomb.

He refused to consider whether it might have been Nangong Liu, clearing up loose ends before his campaign to be Mayor of Shanghai. If it had been him, what could Chu Wanning do about it from his hospital bed?

At the end of May, finally able to sleep on his back and sit up in bed, they decided that he was well enough be allowed access to a tablet. “Just an hour of internet, in the afternoon. So you don’t tire yourself out. But it’ll make you feel more like yourself.”

That was how they framed everything. *This will make you feel more like yourself.*

Chu Wanning didn’t want to feel like himself. He didn’t want to *be* himself. Himself was someone depraved enough to have a pathetic crush on their own student. Himself was so unlikeable that two separate people had tried to kill him, and one of them his own father.

Himself was ugly, bad-tempered, socially inept, and fundamentally unlovable.

This fact was immediately reiterated to him when he opened his e-mails, untouched for nearly three months.

He had over one thousand unread messages. In contrast to his physical surroundings, Chu Wanning kept his online existence extremely neat – he had never had more than a hundred unread e-mails, let alone over a thousand.

He glanced down over the first twenty subject lines. Between several requests for interviews – including with Xinhua News! Shameless! – and a lot of gloating e-mails promising that the next one would be more accurate and deadly, he realised that this had been a terrible mistake. Heart aching, tired beyond words, he went to close the app, when suddenly the entire screen was taken up by a blaring notification.

Mo Ran, requesting a face-call.

"No," Chu Wanning said out loud, and pressed to confirm.

"No!" he said again, desperately trying to cancel the call. And then there was his horrified face, in all its despicable glory, sharing a screen with Mo Ran, who looked like he'd just escaped from a museum podium.

"SHIZUN!"

Chu Wanning managed to turn the camera off. "I didn't mean to pick up!"

Mo Ran had the gall to *laugh at him*. "I'm so glad you did! I saw you came online and I was so excited, I know it's super rude to call without messaging first, but I couldn't stop myself!"

Oh, he had thought that nearly three months without seeing Mo Ran's face might have eased the fist that clenched his heart a little. No chance. It was like seeing colour or hearing running water or smelling incense or tasting sugar dissolve on your tongue again.

Then he managed to look past his beautiful face. There was a calligraphic scroll hanging behind him, on white-gold brocade.

I am in Duling with coarse-cloth clothes

Older now, anticipating awkwardness of mind and body.

Refusing An Lushan's job offer, my life is loyal, yet humble

Inside I am like the leaders Ji and Qi.

Actually, I have become less useful as I descend the bureaucratic ladder

White-haired, willing to accept my fate.

Cover my coffin, too late to change my destiny

Hoping they remember me for what I am.

During my years of poverty, still concerned about the country

My insides are hot and full of turmoil.

My peers laugh at me, tell me I am too old for government positions

Even more, they ride me for writing these grandiose songs.

It was the beginning of Du Fu's *Five Hundred Words*; he recognised it instantly. And then he recognised the calligrapher's handwriting.

"Are you *in my flat*?"

Chapter 25: Filthy Minds

Chapter Notes

> Happy Birthday, Chu Wanning!! 💮🥂🎉🎂 I promise, we will get to your birthday in the fic soon - but it will be your 30th, so I'm not sure how much you'll enjoy it...
>
> Thank you so much to you all for reading and commenting - I would have given up on this fic long ago without all your encouragement and kindness! ♥ You are the best motivation, thank you, and I'm very excited to reach the Respect and Cherish Era!

Mo Ran looked out at him from the tablet. It was propped up on the table attached to the hospital bed, positioned so that Chu Wanning could use it with his one good arm.

“You told me to water your plants. Your *penzai*.”

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. “You’re clearly on a laptop.”

Mo Ran rubbed the back of his head. “I brought it with me! To look at the different species, you know. What kind of care they need.” Mo Ran’s posture made the side of his t-shirt rise up a little. Chu Wanning could see an inch of golden skin, just one inch of Mo Ran’s smooth, immaculate flank, and his brain shut down. “You know… How much water…”

Chu Wanning brought himself back to reality, and checked again that his own camera was off. “Ah,” he said venomously, furious at himself, “so this is the first time you’re watering them? *Three months* after I asked you to?”

“Shit,” Mo Ran said, and grinned sheepishly at him. “No, yeah, okay, you caught me. Of course I’ve been watering them, I did all the research the first time. I made notes, look!” He held up a sheet for the camera. “I, er. I started doing my revision here… I was coming in to water the plants anyway – they’re all doing great, I’ll show you them! – and then I tidied up so it’d be nice for when you got back, and then I… Well, you had a lot of the books I needed, and we don’t have a lab anymore, and every time I went to the library everyone was coming up and *asking* me about it, and I just kind of started… I’m really sorry.”

Chu Wanning should have felt angry. He didn't. He felt touched.

And then Mo Ran said, "It made me feel a bit closer to you when I was missing you, I guess."

Chu Wanning blinked in shock; his breath stuttered. "Missing *me*?" He must have misheard him.

Mo Ran *frowned*. "Yeah? Yeah, of course."

When I was missing you. Not just one time that Mo Ran missed him, but something that happened more than once. Something that happened regularly.

He'd thought that Mo Ran would be relieved to be able to live without his demanding, uptight, boring tutor bearing down on him all the time, acting like a conversational black hole in the canteen, or being such an embarrassing, pitiful burden in the hospital. But after the dust had cleared, and Mo Ran had recovered and returned to normal life, he actually…?

Then Chu Wanning realised. He'd been in this clinic too long, where the days and the weeks ran together in a timelessness of recovery. It was the end of May – it was exam time in Sisheng. That's why Mo Ran needed a place to revise.

His heart plummeted into his stomach. Of course. For one idiotic, delusional second, he'd thought that perhaps Mo Ran had been missing *him*. But of course he was missing his teacher, abandoned right before his final exams.

The exhaustion swept back over him, like a wave on the sand.

"I'm sorry that I'm not there for your exams," he said. "But you'll do fine. You've mastered the fundamentals; as long as you carefully read the questions, you'll not have a problem."

Mo Ran opened his mouth to say something. He was still frowning. “Hm… Um. Hm. I’m actually – not in an arrogant way! But I’m not actually worried about the exams. All your students have been put in with Dr. Shu, and his students fucking *hate* us. They call us the Chuites. He grades to a curve-”

Chu Wanning scoffed at this, and Mo Ran smiled.

“Yeah, I knew you’d hate that. But we’ve completely thrown off the entire thing. The guy who used to be top gives us so much grief, stupid prick.”

“Who’s the top student now?”

Mo Ran shrugged.

Satisfaction and pride won out over the cold tiredness. “Good. You stay there in the actual exams.”

Mo Ran was looking at him with the strangest expression. “I will. I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t. Dr. Shu – he always takes the path of least resistance. That’s the problem – his attitude is fine if all a student wants is a degree, any degree, without caring in the least about the integrity of the subject. But even his best students will have difficulty if they go elsewhere. I covered one of his lectures last year, and one of his *final year* undergraduates couldn’t describe the Newton-Raphson method.”

“He doesn’t ask any questions in lectures! It’s just him talking at the front.”

“Jiiii, I’m not even surprised. He’s been giving the same lectures for the last decade. He never updates them. ‘The fundamental principles remain the same!’ Utter nonsense. I told him to remember Confucius: ‘I listen and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.’

Students need to understand *applications*, not just fundamentals, or they'll never *understand* the fundamentals either!"

Chu Wanning suddenly realised how absolutely insufferable he sounded – not only didactic and hectoring, even to another professor, but quoting Confucius as well. Mo Ran would certainly be regretting his call now – but when he looked, Mo Ran was staring into the camera with a soft smile on his face.

"This is what I missed, Shizun," he said, quiet but very deliberate. "In the most respectful way possible, we don't need you for the exams. You've already taught us so well. But I missed talking to you."

Chu Wanning could not have been more shocked if Mo Ran had reached through the tablet screen and slapped him.

"But- But I-"

It turned out that Mo Ran would make an excellent épéeist. He cut straight through Chu Wanning's defences to deliver a single killing blow.

He tried to think of a cutting remark. He tried to remind himself that Mo Ran was mocking him, making fun of him. But Mo Ran's face was so open, so sincere.

"Shizun?" Mo Ran said, frowning in concern. He was looking at the camera, not at his own face.

"Water the plants!" Chu Wanning finally managed. "Since you're clearly so bored!"

And Mo Ran *laughed.* "I'd rather talk to you than do anything else, but I promise, the plants will all be thriving by the time you get back. Did they say how long they think it'll be?"

The invisible hand around his throat loosened its grip just slightly. “I don’t know. A couple of months.”

“How have all the operations gone? What did they do?”

“Oh, I didn’t realise you were a medic as well. Top of the class in engineering, you’ll probably be off to Guyueye next too.”

The bastard laughed again. “No, I gave my word, never to go to Rufeng or Guyueye, if Shizun doesn’t like them. But you’re feeling all right? I only saw you for a second, but it was so good to see you sitting up. Are they letting you lie on your back yet?”

Heat prickled up Chu Wanning’s chest, burnt up the sides of his neck. Lying on his back – why would Mo Ran be thinking about him lying on his back?

Why did the thought of lying on his back, with Mo Ran’s face in front of him…

There was a spark of something behind his hips, something completely unfamiliar and quite shocking. “Why?” he demanded sharply.

“Well… It just didn’t look as comfortable for you. Lying on your front all the time.”

Oh, that was worse. He tried not to think of his embarrassing prone position in the hospital, but to remember all the times that Mo Ran had seen him like that – to think of the Xues seeing him in that position! *Nangong Si*! – *what* must he have looked like?!

“It’s fine! Either’s fine!” he said, and then heard the words. He bit his fist.

Mo Ran frowned tightly, shifting on the sofa. He cleared his throat and crossed his legs. He looked… Confused? Chu Wanning couldn’t tell – he just knew that Mo Ran looked uncomfortable.

As he would. As he should. *He* clearly wasn't thinking about the *implications* of lying in this way or that. And certainly he wouldn't be thinking about them when talking to his *teacher*-

It was like being doused in icy water. Of course, Mo Ran hadn't realised the innuendo. Of course, he didn't understand why Chu Wanning's voice had suddenly risen an octave. A filthy mind will always see filth, and Chu Wanning was the dirty one, for such a thought to jump into his head when he was speaking to his student.

"I, um, I'd better go," Mo Ran said. "Water the *penzai*."

Oh, what had he done? What had he *done*? Had Mo Ran… heard something, somehow? Had Chu Wanning betrayed himself without realising it?

"Yes – yes, of course. Um. Work hard."

"Mngk. Yeah. Sure, sure will, I mean, will do." Mo Ran was no longer looking into the camera, but somewhere up at the ceiling. "Can I call you again?"

Chu Wanning had been half expecting Mo Ran to have slammed the laptop screen down on him already. "What? Again? No!"

"Not every day!" Chu Wanning didn't *understand*; Mo Ran was looking away from the camera and the screen even though Chu Wanning's video was off, but he wanted to talk again? "Just – once a week, maybe?"

"Fine," Chu Wanning said, just wanting the conversation to end, "Whatever."

"Great! Great, um, gotta go," Mo Ran said, with a final strained smile, and then he really did slam the laptop shut.

Chu Wanning exhaled and lay back on the bed. What the hell had just happened?

He fretted over it all night, not knowing what to worry about first. He settled on that warmth at the base of his spine, when he had thought of himself… in bed. With Mo Ran.

He had never actually thought of it before. For years he had enjoyed Mo Ran's company and wanted him to succeed. He had had such a traumatic childhood, Chu Wanning knew, and concern and solidarity were all he felt. But as Mo Ran entered the second half of his undergraduate degree, with some good grades finally under his belt, he became more and more confident, and with his confidence came a new *joie de vivre* and charm.

Chu Wanning had developed a crush. It was an innocent little thing, consisting primarily of a desire for Mo Ran to like him as well, to admire him in some way. He barely even recognised it *as* a crush; he had never had one before. Then Mo Ran had chosen him to be his Master's supervisor, the… the *pash* became an infatuation, and Chu Wanning was doomed.

Unfortunately for Chu Wanning, just as his feelings were deepening, Mo Ran was becoming more and more obsessed with Shi Mei – sweet, beautiful Shi Mei. Chu Wanning, with his demands on his time and his expectations, seriously cramped his style. They clashed more and more, and the flower that had slowly been blooming in Chu Wanning's heart didn't die but hardened into something thorny, digging painfully into his flesh where his hands couldn't dig it out.

But his fantasies had never gone beyond holding hands, the stroking of hair, a long stare into the eyes. Perhaps, when he dared, in the lonely hours of the night, a chaste kiss...

Even now, his thoughts didn't include what they might *do* in bed – the mere idea of that closeness, of Mo Ran's *choice*, of his warm, firm body next to Chu Wanning's was enough to agonise him. It was painful, and yet irresistible; it was like pressing one's tongue to a loose tooth as a child, seeing how much pain one could endure over and over again.

What was he doing? In the deep darkness of his room he pressed the heels of his hands to his closed eyelids until stars began to coruscate and slide past his gaze. It was wrong. It was *wrong*. Not only was Chu Wanning his teacher, in a position of trust and authority, but he was nearly thirty years old, truly *ancient* in comparison to Mo Ran.

He had nearly killed him.

And then he had nearly made him watch his suicide. He had manipulated Mo Ran into talking him down, hadn't he? He hadn't meant to, but that was what he had done. Huaizui always used to tell him that he was being manipulative; Chu Wanning didn't know when he was doing it, and he could never stop himself. But showing emotions was manipulative. Demanding attention was manipulative. Desiring closeness was manipulative…

How did everyone else do it? How could other people become friends or fall in love without falling into that trap of unwitting manipulation? Chu Wanning suspected it was some natural defect in himself, some error in construction that made his paths go awry, like a wheel that was out of balance. Constantly, he had to manually correct himself, but it was so… exhausting. It was exhausting.

I'm so tired, he thought, as he fell into a sleep that would not cure it. *I'm so tired*.

*

Mo Ran point-blank refused to wank in Chu Wanning's bathroom.

It felt like it would be a violation of some kind, but it was an extremely tempting one.

"Either's fine."

He reminded himself that Chu Wanning really was the Sexless Savant, even when the nickname wasn't maliciously meant. He was innocent. He genuinely didn't think about such things. He hadn't noticed Mo Ran's unintentional double meaning and had freely said those words which now so tormented him.

He had to leave the flat, revision be damned, but he couldn't exactly walk the streets of Wuchang in his current… state. He tried to think of the least sexy thing he could, the most disturbing and upsetting: mouldy mattresses, incense-

Shi Mei.

Oh, that did it.

It was so strange, how one piece of knowledge could completely rearrange your worldview.

But even before he knew what a lying sack of shit Shi Mei really was… he'd never wanked over him. It was odd, to realise it now. He'd never even fantasised about him.

He'd never wanted to dirty sweet, pure Shi Mei with all his filthy thoughts. Instead, some of the most alluring and tempting of his fantasies had been about Chu Wanning. It felt so good to imagine taking him down a peg or two, making him *beg* Mo Ran, arching that ramrod-straight spine and pulling on his long, silky hair until he cried.

No, no! That was *not* where his mind was meant to go.

He gathered up his things and made for the door before his thoughts returned to Chu Wanning again.

Mo Ran's time of imagining such things was Over. Done. Finished. He was going to *atone*, he was going to do nothing to Chu Wanning but respect him and cherish him and keep his promises. He was going to become as innocent and good and principled and kind as Chu Wanning was, dedicated to academic integrity and… and helping the common people, or whatever. No more lies, no more horniness, no more awkwardness.

Simple.

Chapter 26: All Things to Rise

The night after his last exam, the Xues took Mo Ran out for hot pot in the best restaurant in Wuchang to celebrate. They could all handle their spice, so they opted for a fountain pot of pork bone broth and beef tallow soup.

The last time Mo Ran had had this particular combination was when he had visited Shi Mei in Ya'an. The night he had bought the drug.

He dragged a piece of beef tongue through the sesame oil in front of him. That night he had felt so protective of Shi Mei. He remembered thinking how fragile he looked, how melancholy.

He'd been such a fool.

But it was wrong to blame Shi Mei. Shi Mei had manipulated him, but he had manipulated Chu Wanning in turn. He'd thought he was so justified, so righteous, but the rot hadn't begun with the drug in Ya'an.

It had begun with the mug.

If he'd actually been focused only on his plan, only on winning justice for Shi Mei, he'd have bought a different mug. Something plain and elegant. Instead, he'd been malicious right from the beginning – he'd bought something girly and flashy and gaudy, something that he'd known Chu Wanning would hate, just for the wicked pleasure of watching him forced to accept it out of politeness.

He'd done it to feel powerful. He'd done it to show himself that he could control Chu Wanning.

And then Chu Wanning had drunk out of that mug every single day.

He could feel Chu Wanning in his arms like a ghost, pressing his hot, tear-streaked face into the crook of Mo Ran's neck. *"The mug's broken!"*

Chu Wanning had treasured that stupid, shitty mug. Because one of his students had bought it for him.

Mo Ran put down the tongue – he couldn't face it – and picked up a slice of tripe instead. But he couldn't face eating that either.

He remembered the chewy noodles he'd bought, that first lunch Mo Ran had wheedled Chu Wanning to, on the same day. He'd vaguely thought that Chu Wanning didn't like spicy food, but he'd thought *Fuck him* and carried the two bowls back. And Chu Wanning had tried to eat it, even through the sweat and the tears and the coughing fits.

Because a student had bought it for him.

Because Mo Ran had bought it for him.

And he'd thanked him for it.

"Hm?" he said; Wang Chuqing had asked him a question about the paper. "Oh, right, sorry – well, it was the thermofluid mechanics paper. So, um, for example, there was one question with a map of the Daxue mountains, and it picked out various rivers and roads and you had to calculate the rate of change in the velocity fields, you know, how does it change when there's a wind tunnel nozzle, what's the difference in fluid acceleration when the nozzle's on or off, what's the velocity of different viscosities, that kind of thing."

"That's got to be a Yuheng question," Xue Zhengyong said proudly. "I remember the first year he arrived he went all around Wuchang, wrote up a whole report about landslide risks. That's why we've got that berm above the library now."

Even with his thoughts on Shi Mei and his atrocious, evil fuck-up, Mo Ran couldn't help but smile. "One of the sub-questions was about how a berm would effect the fluid velocity, so that scans."

"ICFMFA's going to be in Venice in November," Xue Meng said. "That'd be amazing, wouldn't it? You should ask Chu-*laoshi* if you can submit a paper."

"That wouldn't give you much time – when are the abstracts in, Meng'er? You could go together, if you submit one too."

"Actually," Mo Ran said. He put his chopsticks down. He'd been expecting that this topic might come up, and it was better to say it now, while everyone was there… "I've actually decided not to do the PhD."

There was silence for a long moment, finally broken by Xue Meng's "What the fuck?"

"Language! Ran'er… Is this about the bomb?" his aunt asked with concern.

"No! No, of course not."

"There would be no shame if it was – it was a traumatic experience-"

"I know, Auntie, but it's not. It's… I mean, in the hospital. If Chu Wanning hadn't had his own money from when he was a child, he'd had been stuck. The only option would have been to accept charity from his friends. And I *know* that you wanted to help, I know that, but… He's devoted his life to academia, and what's he got from it? Hatemail, scars, a pokey one-bedroom flat and a government file. He can't leave the country. If he says anything, publishes anything that could be construed as the least bit political or critical… We know what could happen to him. I know that he's a special case, but if he didn't have friends like you looking out for him…"

Mo Ran swallowed painfully. He wasn't good at speeches like this. "And I'm just like him in that regard. For far less principled reasons, sure, but… If I hadn't come to you when I did, I would probably be in prison by now. If I was lucky. More likely, I'd have been cremated after being stabbed in some gang tussle and my ashes in a box somewhere. You've given me a life and an education and let me experience things I'd never even…"

He stopped, because Auntie Wang's eyes were full of tears. They glittered like needles in his heart, and he reached across the table to take her hand. "Auntie, don't cry!"

"That wasn't your fault, Ran'er, things were so hard for you! We were so happy when we found you, it's been our pleasure to help you – hasn't it, *laogong*?"

"Of course it has. And you've grown up so much," Xue Zhengyong said. "You've become a fine young man."

"I really haven't," Mo Ran said. He couldn't help but glance at Xue Meng, who returned his gaze flatly. "But I want to, now. I really do."

"But you said that education helped, and it did – you've *flourished* – you've been accepted unconditionally onto the PhD course, and you'll be wonderful in that as well," Wang Chuqing said.

"Maybe one day. But we've already got Mengmeng holding up the family honour in that regard. I want to be able to help people the way that you can help people, Uncle. In the present, practically, now; academia helps more in the long run, perhaps, but it's abstract. I'm not like that. And what allows you to do so much good for people is money. I know you'd said that you'd pay for the PhD, and I'm so grateful to you for it, but I can't live on charity forever."

"It's not charity, Ran'er. We're your *family*."

Mo Ran's stomach clenched with guilt. One day, he told himself. One day… "I know. I never… I never dreamt I'd have a family like you. That I'd be so lucky. But because we're

family, I want to be able to look after you the way that you've looked after me. I want to get a job."

"What about Chu-*laoshi*?" Xue Meng said darkly. "Is it because you don't want to be taught by him?"

It was fair, but it hurt. "Yes, actually." There were looks of shock and outrage around the table; he held out his hand. "Not like that! I… When we were both in the hospital, I learnt something. About him and his supervisor."

Xue Zhengyong was frowning. "Rong Yan?"

"Yes. I don't want to betray his wish for privacy, but… His supervisor's husband – Nangong Liu – had an affair. She wanted a divorce. I think he was putting pressure on her, until she died, but there was basically a threat made to suggest that she had been having an affair with Chu Wanning."

"An affair? That's most preposterous thing I've ever heard! He was a teenager – he was her son's age! And she most upright woman I've ever met – the second, my darling," he said, taking his wife's hand. "But completely trustworthy. She'd never be inappropriate with a student."

"Exactly. If the rumour could be started even about her, just for being kind and friendly to a student – and such a young student! – he's been worried that it might be said about him as well. There'd be plenty of people who would benefit from a rumour like that. And I've seen some of the hate mail he's got. There's a few that… make suggestions. About why he isn't married. Why he doesn't have a girlfriend."

"Chu-*laoshi* isn't gay!" Xue Meng was too loud in his fury; several other patrons turned around to look at him.

"It wouldn't matter if he was," his mother said, unusually sharply. Xue Meng blinked at her in surprise, but she held his gaze. "Why would it matter, if he was gay? Would you like him less, Meng'er?"

Xue Meng looked like he had never considered this thought in his life. “N-no?”

Xue Zhengyong was nodding slightly, as though several puzzle pieces had just slotted into space. “I see. That’s why he’s never invited either of you to dinner, or gone out after exams...”

“Mn, exactly,” Mo Ran said. He was still glaring at Xue Meng. They would be talking about *that* later. “He’s worried about being inappropriate. When he was ill in the winter, Auntie, and you gave me that food with the ginger to bring round to him – he wouldn’t let me into his flat. I could see how much it pained him to be inhospitable and seem ungrateful, but he was worried more about that boundary.”

“So that’s why you don’t want him to be your supervisor? Because he won’t take you out drinking?” Xue Meng said, scrabbling to regain the moral high ground.

Mo Ran gave this the withering look it deserved. “I’m saying that he’ll never be friends with a student. And right now… I think that instead of another student to look after, he needs a friend to look after *him*.”

There was silence around the table, and Mo Ran lifted his chin. “He’s looked after me for years, so now it’s my turn. Uncle, I know you’re his best friend, but you’re his *only* friend as well. And you’re… I mean, with no disrespect at all-“

“I’m twenty-five years older than him,” Xue Zhengyong finished.

Mo Ran gave him a lopsided grin. “Not that you look it!”

Xue Zhengyong laughed. “Good save. Ahhhh. Well, it’s clear you’ve given it a lot of thought, Ran’er. And we’ll support you in it. Do you have any ideas what you’d like to do?”

“I want to stay in Wuchang,” Mo Ran said. “Near you guys. I know that limits things a lot.”

“It does, but it’s always worthwhile to see how things work in different areas… I think you need a holiday still – you threw yourself right back into work after the hospital, so relax now, enjoy yourself. And in the autumn… Would you be interested in the construction side of things, maybe? Supply and logistics?”

When he was very, very small, he and his mother had once spent a night sleeping on a pile of cardboard behind a fishmonger’s. That night, he’d thought that one day he would like to make sure that everyone had a house to sleep in.

“Yeah.” He smiled softly. “I think I’d like that.”

It was a weight off his shoulders. Xue Zhengyong ordered some more wine for them, and proposed a toast to Mo Ran’s new direction. Mo Ran found that his appetite had suddenly doubled, and he attacked the hot pot with renewed gusto.

They ate until they could barely move, and Mo Ran, even in the midst of his anxiety and his guilt… he felt happy. He was in the depths, yes, but there was a light to guide him out, and he had people to support him on the journey through the darkness.

There was something he had to say, though. When his aunt and uncle stepped out to find a taxi, Mo Ran caught Xue Meng’s shoulder. “Hey… What you said earlier. The gays might be closer than you think, Mengmeng.”

Xue Meng looked up at him with a scathing expression. “Oh, fuck off. I remember you and Song Quitong.”

“And since her I’ve only fucked men,” Mo Ran said. “I don’t give a fuck what you say to me. But when Chu Wanning comes back, don’t say that shit in front of him.”

Xue Meng’s lips thinned. “So he *is* gay.”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. But I’ve seen some of the letters he gets, and the kind of things people say about him, and I’ve heard what his shit excuse for a father said about him, and I know it’d hurt him if he heard you saying shit like that. So don’t let him hear it.”

Xue Meng shook Mo Ran’s hand off his arm. “It’s a bit late to be protective.”

“I know. So I’ve got to make up for lost time.” Mo Ran gave him a crooked grin. “And you’re the one who set me straight. I’m grateful. I know I didn’t seem it at the time, but… I’d rather be pissed off by someone telling me the truth than someone flattering me and lying to me and… manipulating me to do fucked-up shit.”

Xue Meng glanced out of the door to make sure his parents were out of earshot; Mo Ran felt another stab of gratitude for that.

“Shi Mei didn’t make you pretend to be Chu-*laoshi*’s friend. That was you.”

“It was. I know. I want to… I know I can’t make it right. But I want to try.” His smile widened into a grin. “Besides… you’re really not in a position to sound homophobic, Mengmeng. If people say shit about Chu Wanning because he doesn’t have a girlfriend… think of what people could say about you and Mei Hanxue, the way you hang off each other…”

“Shut up!" Xue Meng shouted, but Mo Ran could hear something back in his voice. Some kind of warmth, some kind of... Not affection, perhaps. But something close to it. Mo Ran hadn't realised how much he'd missed it. "I don’t hang off him, don’t be gross, he hangs off *me*!”

“Oh, because that’s so much better, is it? You like that, do you?” Mo Ran said lasciviously, and Xue Meng gave him a shove.

“We’re not all lecherous dogs like you, you know!”

“No, no, I know, you’re a pure, innocent virgin, saving himself for… Wait, which twin will go first?”

“Boys, we’ve got a taxi,” Xue Zhengyong said, turning around just in time to see his son leap onto his nephew.

Chapter 27: Faster Than Witches

Chapter Notes

> I had sooooo much fun writing this chapter! Got to do looooads of research into China's high-speed railway system; trains were my first hyperfixation, so this is me and Chu Wanning: ♥🚄♥🤝♥🚄♥

“Dr. Huang honestly thinks you'd be more comfortable flying,” said Wu Xiulan, Chu Wanning's specialised care co-ordinator. “I can cancel the train and book a flight for you. It’d be no trouble for you to stay an extra day.”

“You’re very kind, Miss Wu,” Chu Wanning replied, “But I really would prefer to travel by train.”

“It’ll take twice as long.”

“I’ve paid for a Business Class seat – I’ll be able to lie down. I’ll probably sleep the whole way.” It had cost the best part of 3000 yuan as well, but on this occasion Chu Wanning thought it would be worth it, for the space and relative privacy, as well as for the reclining seat.

“There’s more likely to be delays or cancellations. The plum rains have been late this year...”

“It’s nearly August. They’ve largely stopped. I promise, I’ll be fine, and if my shoulder plays up, I’ll take a dose of painkillers.”

She glared at him. “Don't try to be stoic.”

“I won’t. On my honour. I always do exactly as I'm told.”

“You’ve been the most headstrong and disobedient patient I’ve ever seen,” Wu Xiulan replied, but she was smiling. She looked down at the small duffle bag Chu Wanning carried in his right hand; he’d arrived with nothing on him, and more than half of the bag was taken up with dressings, gels, medications and spare support straps and compression braces.

Wu Xiulan herself had run out to buy him some essentials: his new phone and tablet, toiletries, underwear and socks, pyjamas, and a ‘civilian’ outfit to travel home in.

He’d not been in a rush to order parcels to the clinic.

“You’ve got the Cica-care sheets on? You’re going to go most of the day without washing them, so you absolutely have to wash and reapply them tonight.”

“I will. The taxi’s waiting.” Chu Wanning shook her hand. “Thank you.”

“We’re all going to miss you so much,” she said - a kind lie, he thought, but one that he appreciated. Then she held out a paper bag. “For the train, and for when you get home. From all of us. Please keep in touch, we all want to know how you get on.”

“I will,” Chu Wanning said, and managed a smile in return. He had spent most of the day before bidding farewells, to his doctors, nurses, physiotherapist, masseuse and dermatologist. He'd had to include a number of apologies for his temper and his stubbornness mixed among them. The gift must be something they gave to all their patients.

The taxi took the best part of an hour through the city. Chu Wanning watched the sky lighten and the sun rise. It was going to be a long day, and he felt oddly unmoored. For five months now, his life had been one of routine, dictated entirely by medical professionals. Recovery, surgery, recovery, surgery, recovery, surgery – sleeping, eating, barely able to muster the energy to speak to the consultants. It had been a relief, to give the reins of his existence to someone else. They couldn’t make more of a mess of it than he had already.

Once all the major surgeries were out of the way, it was a new routine of physiotherapy, massages, dermatological treatment. The skin grafts on his back and shoulder had taken well, and he'd built his tolerance to the Cica-care patches up to 23 hours a day.

Apparently, he qualified for some experimental treatment for scar minimisation, a mixture of injections directly into the dermis and a new gel on the surface, newly developed with perfect timing by Guyueye, which sparked several days of battle between Chu Wanning and the consultants. Chu Wanning refused point-blank to do anything to help Guyueye, until eventually one of the doctors made him see sense by pointing out that every single medication and dressing they used were either designed or manufactured by Guyueye, so if he was serious about his boycott then he should just leave.

At least he had been able to refuse to allow his case to be used in any scientific literature on the subject. It pissed him off that it had worked so well.

Pissed off, but secretly glad of it now. The vibrations of the taxi were more of a strain than he had expected they would be.

The clinic had, skirmishes aside, been peaceful. Once he had been able to overcome his revulsion to touch, he'd grown quite close to his masseuse. He'd had time to read novels, for the first time in a long time. He watched the television for the first time in *years*; fantasy dramas that Mo Ran recommended, avoiding the news except when he was sure he wouldn't be caught. In the last month, he'd even taught tai chi to some of the staff and other patients in the clinic's little garden.

And then, every Friday night, there had been his phone call with Mo Ran.

Once it was light enough, he looked through the bag that Wu Xiulan had given to him. A packet of Longjing tea from the Tianshan Tea Market, a gift box of mooncakes, a packet of fish *jiaozi* for the train, face-wipes and hand sanitiser, a bar of plum blossom-scented soap, and finally, bottles of Liushen shampoo and conditioner. That had to have been picked out by his main nurse, Xiong Huifang - she had been outraged that he only washed his hair with the same bar of soap he used for his body, and had brought in her own favourite brand from home to show him the difference proper shampoo and conditioner made.

It was also she who had insisted on having a hairdresser come in before he left Shanghai. After the explosion, the doctors had had to cut some chunks out of his hair on his left side - it had fused to the burnt skin, and cutting it had been the only option. The hairdresser had evened this up, trimming the uneven growth of the last five months and mirroring it on the right side while saving as much length as she could. The result was that he could still wear his hair in a bun or a ponytail as he chose, but his face was now framed by shorter lengths hanging on either side.

She had shown him a mirror when she had finished, hoping that he would be pleased. He'd managed to give the appropriate compliments on her skill, but a softening haircut could only do so much to offset the sharp, pale skull that stared back at him. One of the new curtains hid the scar along his left temple, where a nail had narrowly missed his eye, and the bruising and swelling had finally faded, but he'd lost weight that he didn't have to lose, and permanent exhaustion had painted dark shadows under his eyes.

Still. Worrying about a hairstyle had been a welcome reprieve from worrying about the Frankensteinian patchwork of his back.

Now, outside the safety of the clinic, he was wishing she'd just cut all of it off. He wore a face-mask, but he'd eventually seen a little of the news coverage of the bombing. When he stepped out of the taxi he felt as though a huge, hot spotlight had just focused on him, and that even with the mask everyone would immediately know who he was.

He rushed through Shanghai Hongqiao Station with his head bowed. In the business class lounge he picked out four cans of Coca-Cola and put them in his duffel, which he hoped would last him most of the train journey if there were no sealed drinks available. They would probably have a hot water dispenser for tea, in which case he'd drink that instead, but if it was out of commission at least he would have the cans.

At the clinic they had become used to Chu Wanning's idiosyncrasy that he wouldn't drink anything that he hadn't prepared or opened himself. He still thought that the drug from that horrific night had been meant for Mo Ran, not for himself, but the idea of being so vulnerable, so liable to say anything or do anything... Sometimes he woke up in a cold sweat, not thinking about the bomb and that long crawl out of the lab, but of a sick fantasy of a man pressed against him, or of the graze of tarmac against his cheek as his body spasmed.

Of the overwhelming shame and bone-deep fear he had felt the next day, that he might have revealed his worst and most disgusting feelings to the object of them.

He had hoped they might fade a little, in the time he had spent away from Mo Ran. Pure idiocy. One might think he'd never read a poem in his life.

Mo Ran had faithfully rung him every week, apparently not minding that Chu Wanning refused to turn his camera on, and had given every appearance of enjoying their conversations. He had been visibly proud of his top grade in his Masters, and had worn his graduation gown to show him.

Chu Wanning had complimented him and ask for him to send him pictures of the ceremony, and all the time his heart had been breaking. He was so sad to have missed it. But they would see each other again in the new semester, in the Autumn, when Mo Ran would begin his doctorate.

Unless he asked for another supervisor…

Chu Wanning shook the thought out of his head. It was an old fear resurfacing; Mo Ran had said nothing to indicate he wanted any other professor to supervise his work, and indeed, he would have to have Chu Wanning's signature as his reference to apply for one. No. He had enough pain and anxiety without inventing reasons for more.

Trains were one of Chu Wanning's oldest obsessions, pre-dating his adoption by years. He had slept in a single bed with two other boys, and he remembered curling up around a small metal model of a steam train like the other children curled around cuddly toys. He had carried it with him constantly, until one of the older boys had smashed it.

The G-train was nothing like the steam train of his childhood; it was sleek and shining and beautifully designed. Under normal circumstances he'd have gone up and down the length of it, taking photographs, but just walking through the station had exhausted him, and he had reclined his seat and fallen asleep before the train left the platform.

“Lankao South, this is Lankao South. Please take all belongings with you and be careful when disembarking the train. Thank you for travelling with us!”

Chu Wanning considered trying to sleep again, then decided against it; his shoulder felt red-hot with pain. He blearily opened his eyes and groaned, then pressed the button to raise the seat back to a sitting position.

Lankao South – they’d reached Kaifeng. 11:40 in the morning; they’d not reach Chengdu for another seven hours.

There was, as he’d predicted, a hot water dispenser, just outside the Business Class Compartment. He used the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and made a cup of green tea. He took a sealed bottle of water from the complimentary tray, and settled back in his seat.

He took off his face mask and swallowed some propranolol and some painkillers. He’d been intending on getting a bus to Ya’an, but was coming to realise that his pride had been greater than his endurance. He’d find a hotel in Chengdu and take the night, before heading off tomorrow into the mountains to Wuchang.

And then…

And then he’d not be seeing Mo Ran for a couple of months, he told himself sharply, when the academic year began again.

He had deliberately not told the Xues when he would be coming back. Xue Zhengyong would insist either on ordering an extortionately priced taxi for him or on picking him up himself, and would not have taken ‘No’ for an answer. It would be a four hour drive in each direction – five, realistically, given the on-going rains and the state of the mountain roads – and Chu Wanning would not only have to endure the obligation of gratitude but also question upon question…

No, no – better to be back for a couple of days, then let Xue Zhengyong know that he was all right. Then they could discuss his return to work.

There were only six seats in the Business compartment, three of either side of the central aisle. Chu Wanning had the strange feeling of being watched. He looked out of his small shielded area, and was immediately face-to-face with the passenger in the seat to his left, and forward one.

She was a good-looking young woman, with a pristine haircut and subtly stylish clothes. She was staring right at him.

Chu Wanning gave her an anxious nod and sat back in his seat. He put his mask back on.

The train scored across the country like a knife. Chu Wanning exhaled happily when the speedometer over the door passed 350 km/hr. Maybe he should have gone into the railways, rather than CNSA…

No. Despite what had happened afterwards, he had loved CNSA. The stars and the night sky had always been his favourite things, surpassing even trains.

But if he hadn't gone to CNSA, would he have ever gone to Sisheng? He would never have met Mo Ran – or put him in danger…

He sighed, and removed his mask to eat. He couldn't face what passed for a hot meal on here, but he had the *jiaozi*, and the packet of snacks provided by the train company. He opened it up: an egg-yolk pie, a fried dough twist with almonds- oooh, an Orion Choco-Pie. That would do. He'd save that until the end.

They were due to pass through Luoyang at exactly 13:00, so Chu Wanning waited until then to eat lunch. He had never been to Luoyang – or Kaifeng, come to think of it. He would have to look forward to visiting them, instead of mourning that he would never see the pyramids or Florence. He would never go to Kyoto again… No, no. There was plenty to see and explore in China. Excitement was a matter of cultivation of interest; he could do that.

From whose home secretly flies the sound of a jade flute? It's lost amid the spring wind which fills Luoyang city, he thought, as they left Luoyang. *I'll come back*.

He finished his lunch, and leant back to look out of the window, wanting to see Mount Hua. The recent rain had painted the mountainsides a spectacular emerald colour, and he was so intent on spotting the famous peaks that he didn't notice the woman who had come to stand over his seat.

"Chu Wanning?"

He looked around in shock. It was the young woman from the diagonal seat; she beamed at him. She was blushing.

The blood in his veins turned to icewater.

"I thought it was you! I just wanted to check – I wanted to say how much I admire you. You're so brave. Everything you said during your trials; I mean, what you said about the military, in the Supreme People's Court hearing? It was one of the most amazing things I'd ever heard."

No, no, no, please, please, no!

What did he do? What did he say? He was completely frozen in place, words stolen away.

Not that the woman seemed to mind. "What you said about the general secretary… I'd never heard anyone say anything like that about him before. Ever. And the detained lawyers… I think it was really amazing, to use your case to point out what was being done to them."

Was there someone else with her? Was he being recorded? Or was she undercover police herself? A smile, any word of thanks could be construed as agreement.

He needed to disagree. He'd been wrong to criticise the government. He'd been wrong to criticise the military.

But he couldn't. He just couldn't.

"I'm, I. I do apologise," he said, stumbling up out of his seat. "I think the food – I ate fish- Not feeling very well-"

"Of course! I just had to say, I'm sorry for disturbing you when you're travelling. You're an inspiration. I'm a student, and all my friends agree-"

"Mn," he said, knowing that it was rude, knowing that it seemed arrogant. She probably *was* a student, young and idealistic. He was 99% sure she was. But *if*…

He managed to make it to the bathroom and locked the door. His hands were shaking as he put the lid down and sat on the toilet, praying that the signal would allow his call through.

"Yuheng! Hello, so good to hear from you! When are they letting you out-"

"I'm sorry," Chu Wanning said. "I'm sorry to ring you. I'm on the G-train."

"On the train? You should have said! Your fear of planes, I don't know-"

"Zhengyong, please just-" Chu Wanning lowered his voice. "A woman just came up to me. She... She said she admired the stance I took against the government, and what I said about the army and the general secretary."

"Shit," Xue Zhengyong said, instantly serious. "What did you say?"

“Nothing – I didn’t smile or thank her – I said I was feeling sick and came straight to the toilet.”

“Good, that’s good. Yuheng, it's going to be fine. It probably really is just an admirer. God knows you deserve them. But I’m calling my lawyer, and he’s going to message you. Where are you now?”

“In between Luoyang and Huashan.”

“I’ve got you – the G1974 out of Shanghai?"

“That's it.”

“I want you to message me at every station, okay? Then if you stop messaging, we’ll know where you’ve been taken off and we’ll be able to work out which centre they’ve taken you to.”

Chu Wanning pressed his eyes shut. He’d said nothing, written nothing… Why now? His case being raked up again because of the bombing? Journalists looking for motives?

“Yuheng? Yuheng, you’re going to be just fine. You’ve not said anything, you’ve not done anything. If they were going to arrest you for anything they’d have done it long ago.”

“What if they were fabricating a case?” Chu Wanning whispered. “What if-“

Someone rattled on the toilet door.

Chu Wanning checked the lock again. He heard someone outside move away.

“It’s almost certainly nothing,” Xue Zhengyong said. “A naïf who doesn’t realise how she might be coming across. She was probably *flirting* with you! How would they even know what train you were on? And even if she *is* with the government and just happened to recognise you, you didn’t say anything. You reacted perfectly. It’s just your first time out in public after what happened, and you’re understandably on edge.”

Yes… yes, as much as he hated to admit it, that made sense. “Mn.”

“Exactly. She’s probably feeling embarrassed now. It’ll all be nothing, and we’ll both laugh at ourselves for being so silly.”

“What if they’re waiting in Chengdu?” Chu Wanning said, and hated how pathetic he sounded.

“They’re *not*, but… If I were there, I’d pick you up myself, but we’re in Baidicheng, visiting Wifey’s parents. I know – Mo Ran stayed behind, I’ll ring him now, and he’ll pick you up from the station.”

“I can’t ask him to do that – it’s an eight hour round trip! Ten, after the rains!”

“He won’t mind, he’ll be absolutely delighted for the chance to help. I promise. As soon as I mention that you’re arriving today he’ll be in the car before I can ask. And if anyone else recognises you in the station he’ll give them what-for, he’s a big lad.”

Even in the midst of his paranoia and his anxiety, this sparked a feeling of anger. “I don’t need *Mo Ran* to protect me.”

“Of course you don’t – but you *do* need him to drive you. What were you thinking, not telling us? Were you going to get a *bus*?”

“Mn.”

“Idiot,” Xue Zhengyong said, trying to hide the strain in his voice under his affection. “My lawyer’s messaging you now. Just go back to your seat, pretend everything’s fine. Everything *is* fine. 99.99%. But I’m so glad you rang me. Better to be safe than sorry. Keep in touch, and I’ll ask Mo Ran to meet you in Chengdu.”

Chapter 28: Cutting It Fine

Chapter Notes

> Ahhhhh, I was so excited to write the reunion! It feels like it's been much longer than a couple of chapters. Thank you so much for all your comments and your hilarious observations, they are such a delight! 💖

Mo Ran put away his weights with one hand and kept his phone to his ear with the other. “Of course! I’ll go right now. What time is he getting in?”

“What time is it now? Half one – he’s on the G1974, so he should arrive at Chengdu East at half 6.”

“Gotcha,” Mo Ran said, rubbing at his face briskly with his towel.

“That means you have more than enough time to *drive carefully*; what’s the weather like there at the moment?”

“I don’t know, I’m in the gym. Probably pissing it down again. I’ll be fine though.”

“Yes, you will be, because you’ll drive carefully! Ran’er…”

His uncle paused, and something in his voice made Mo Ran pause as well. “What is it?”

“Just… It’s probably nothing. But some woman started talking to him on the train – saying how much she admired him, the trials, stuff like that – and it’s thrown him into a bit of a spin.”

Mo Ran snorted. “I bet it has.” Typical Chu Wanning… And yet. And yet, even amidst his amusement, there was an unexpected spark of anger as well.

“No, not like that! You have a one-track mind… He’s worried it was to see whether he’d thank her or agree with her. Whether she’s with the government. Whether he’s about to be arrested.”

“What?” Mo Ran started to jog to the locker room. “But… he’s not done anything!”

“Aiyo, when’s that ever stopped a government?”

“I mean, he’s been out of the clinic for what, a few hours?”

“I know, I know. But the bomb has raked everything up again – I told him, it’s 99.9% just some poor girl flirting with him – with anyone else, I’d say good luck to her, but as you said, it’s the first time he’s out, it makes sense that he’d be nervous. Someone *did* try to kill him…”

Oh, Mo Ran *hated* that. In his mind, the bomb was like an earthquake or a landslide or a tsunami; a terrible act of nature, but unavoidable and meaningless.

But, of course, it wasn’t. Someone had tried to kill Chu Wanning, right in front of him.

He fumbled with the combination lock on his locker. “Why didn’t he tell us he was coming back today?”

“Probably so we didn’t offer to pick him up. If he’s rung for help, he must be feeling very nervous. So be nice to him.”

“What?! Of course I’ll be *nice* to him!”

“En,” Xue Zhengyong said doubtfully. “I mean, don’t *tease* him about it. He’s always been self-conscious; I reckon he didn’t tell us because he didn’t want to be a bother, and so now he’ll think he is.”

“Better than him being pulled off a train and no one knowing about it for days!”

“Well, precisely, just what I said!”

“Tell him that I was in Chengdu anyway.”

“Ah, I should have thought of that – no, he knows you’re driving there for him.”

“Well, I like driving. Small price to pay for still being alive to drive, isn’t it?”

“En,” Xue Zhengyong said again, but this time it was far happier. “You’re such a good boy, Ran’er. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” Mo Ran said. “I’m excited. I get to be the first to see him! I’m not there, so I need you to rub it in Mengmeng’s face for me, Uncle, that’s my taxi fare.”

“Aiyo, you’re so wicked! Drive carefully, and ring me the second you arrive. Keep in touch. Like I said, it’s certainly nothing.”

“Sure, sure, exactly. Nothing, but understandable. I’ll shower at yours – keys in the same place?”

“Yes, same place. Drive safely!”

Obviously he was going to drive safely! But unlike some people, Mo Ran could drive safely *fast*.

*

Four hours and twenty-four minutes to Chengdu. Four hours and twenty-four minutes! More than an hour longer than his record. But the rain had been like rain at the end of the May rather than at the end of July; a solid mass, more water than air. He wasn't going to be able to see Chu Wanning if he aquaplaned off a mountain, after all.

And he did want to see Chu Wanning. Not in a weird way! Just… to reassure himself that he was all right. He had only had a single glimpse of Chu Wanning's face in five months.

Chengdu East Station had five storeys, and Mo Ran had camped out on the Arrivals Level. Six-thirty came and went. But just as Mo Ran's heart rate was rising, the G-train came in, sleek and beautiful.

There was a vast streaming of people from the train, everyone making their way for the escalators. Mo Ran was sensible enough not to shout for *Chu Wanning,* if they were trying to avoid the attention of any agents of the Ministry of State Security. But he stationed himself beside the ticket barriers, and studied everyone who passed through, thinking that he ought to have communicated a meeting location in advance.

Then, along the platform, walking from the front of the train, Mo Ran saw him.

He wasn't limping or staggering, like a man in pain. He was walking very slowly, back straight, every step deliberate.

Like Chu Wanning in pain.

Mo Ran felt a physical pain in his chest. It was Chu Wanning, he was certain of it, despite the mask and the unfamiliar dark t-shirt and trousers. The clothes were loose, very different to

what he would normally wear; Mo Ran wondered whether someone else had bought them for him. His uncle had said that this was his first time outside the clinic, after all.

The looseness was not only due to the cut of the clothes. Chu Wanning had lost a lot of weight, and he'd not had any to lose. He'd always been slim, but in a lean, lithe way – slim in the way that a sword was slim, thin like a whip. Now he looked as fragile and brittle as glass.

But that was not the only change in his appearance.

He was wearing a high ponytail, but not his usual sharp, strict one.

Chu Wanning had had a haircut. Chu Wanning, who didn't own shampoo and whom Mo Ran had once seen cutting his own hair in the laboratory bathroom with tin snips, had had a *haircut*.

A frankly *disgusting* haircut. Wisps of dark hair across his temples, curling around his eyes; longer locks curtaining his cheeks, softening his face. An errant wave against his neck.

It was obscene! How could Chu Wanning have the *shamelessness* to walk around Chengdu East Railway Station like he'd just been fucked to sleep? *"Oh, a woman spoke to me, I'm so scared, come pick me up."* Yeah, *obviously* women were going to talk to you if you went out in public looking like *that.*

The worst thing was that he hadn't even told Mo Ran that he'd got a haircut. All the times Mo Ran had fantasised about- pictured, *pictured* him, had he been wrong? When had he had it done?!

It was probably for some doctor at the clinic. Some good-looking doctor, all, *Ooooh, Professor Chuuuu, let me massage your shoulder for you*.

No, *worse* than that. A surgeon, who had been *inside* him.

Mo Ran was *incandescent* with fury.

Most of the crowd had melted away into the Arrivals Hall, leaving Mo Ran alone by the ticket barriers. He saw Chu Wanning stop, and a strange thing happened: his shoulders dropped. They'd been warming his ears, but as soon as he saw Mo Ran… And then he registered Mo Ran's expression, and up they went again.

Mo Ran tried to school his face; he grinned and waved. "Shizun!"

Chu Wanning increased his speed, a sour frown settling on his face. He beeped himself through with an attempt at haughtiness. "So sorry for making you come all this way."

Five seconds, and Mo Ran had already fucked up. "Don't be sorry," he said, eyes darting over Chu Wanning's face. Oh, he looked so tired – pale and tense, gaze fixed on the floor. Mo Ran wanted to hug him; he wanted to wrap his arms around him so tightly and completely that the fluorescent lights couldn't bother him, that the sounds of the busy station couldn't touch him.

But he couldn't. Chu Wanning hated to be touched. And Mo Ran didn't know what state his back was in under that t-shirt.

He had never seen Chu Wanning wearing a t-shirt. Only-

Only once. When he had dressed him in his own dark t-shirt, straight from the washing line. The day after Mo Ran had drugged him.

"Don't be sorry," he said again. "It was my pleasure."

Chu Wanning scoffed. His eyes were darting around the station, looking everywhere but at Mo Ran. He held a small duffel bag in his right hand, and clutched a paper bag to his chest

with his left. His knuckles were white. “A very pleasurable drive, was it?”

“It was all right. But even if you’d had a bus ticket, I’d have come to see you get off the train. I wouldn’t have been able to wait.”

This was so bold that Chu Wanning looked up at him, eyes narrowed.

Mo Ran smiled. “Hi.”

“Are you *teasing* me?” Chu Wanning hissed.

“No. Not at all. I couldn’t wait to see you again. But…” Mo Ran raised his hand, and gently touched one of the shorter locks that lay across Chu Wanning’s temple. Now that the shock of it was fading, they looked so soft… “You could have warned me about this.”

Chu Wanning knocked his hand away. “Was I meant to just go around with asymmetric hair? Or cut the right side too and look like some Japanese noblewoman? Don’t be stupid.”

“It looks amazing.”

“Shut up!” Chu Wanning spat, with an edge of real anger. The corners of his eyes were red.

Mo Ran blinked in surprise. He had expected the compliment to be rejected, but there had been genuine venom in Chu Wanning’s voice.

It made him think of something else, it triggered some memory somewhere…

“I mean it,” Mo Ran said, communicating sincerity with his tone. “It’s really flattering! Is that all you have?” He distracted Chu Wanning by pointing down at the duffel bag. “Let me

get it for you."

"I'm perfectly capable of carrying it myself."

"I know you are, but I want to," Mo Ran said easily, taking the duffel. "Let's get to the car. It doesn't look like anyone's here, but better to be safe than sorry."

It was the wrong thing to say. Chu Wanning's ears went bright red, and he looked away again. "I knew there wouldn't be. Stupid."

"It wasn't stupid!"

"How do you know? You weren't there," he snapped. "Your uncle told you, I'm guessing. 'Chu Wanning's panicking over nothing!' Absolutely ridiculous."

"No. He said that someone had been bothering you on the train, and he'd be worried if I didn't pick you up. He said that *you* said it was probably nothing. So I offered to drive down, to put his mind at ease."

"Well, it *was* nothing," Chu Wanning said, staring at the tiles as they made their way out into the humidity, past the Sanxingdui-style bronze pillars.

Mo Ran could hear the self-recrimination in his voice, and he wanted to argue – that Chu Wanning didn't have to feel ashamed of his perfectly justified anxiety, or to be embarrassed by having asked for help. He thought that Chu Wanning would interpret it as pity, and just feel even more ashamed and embarrassed by it.

"I'm glad it was," Mo Ran said. "I don't mind driving to Chengdu. It'd have been far worse to try to track down which detention centre your ass had been dragged to and fight the fucking Ministry of State Security. Not that I wouldn't have enjoyed the latter, but that would have *really* worried my Uncle."

Chu Wanning finally looked up at him again, and pulled off his face mask. “You think you’d be fighting the Ministry of State Security?”

The rain thundered down around them like a waterfall. Mo Ran opened an umbrella, and held it up to cover them both. “Anything, to bust my shizun out of prison.” He knew better than to tell Chu Wanning to come under the shelter; instead, he stepped out into the rain, and began to walk. “Only, obviously, while you’re in there, another inmate gives you the Liancheng Swordplay manual…”

Chu Wanning blinked, and skipped into the rain to catch up with Mo Ran. “The Liancheng… You read *A Deadly Secret*? Am I Di-Yun? Is that what you’ve been reading since your exams?”

“No, no, because Di-Yun didn’t have a loyal disciple to break him out, did he? The whole story changes.” Mo Ran grinned down at him. “You said I could borrow some of your fantasy books.”

“I said you could borrow them, but you actually read them as well.” The corner of Chu Wanning’s mouth quirked. “Well, one of them.”

“They’re good, but some of them are so depressing! I could write a better one. So, after I break you out of prison, obviously we need to train using the secret manual – everyone always goes to the Daxue mountains so we’re all set there.”

“You’re skipping over a significant portion of the story. You think a prison break would be that easy?”

“It would be for me! I have a secret ability where I radiate my qi and heat it to create a burning shield around me that melts bullets.”

“See, your book’s already terrible. If you’re going to have a *deus ex machina* you can’t waste it in the first section of the first book. You’re an engineer – write what you know, break me

out using engineering."

"All right, how would you break you out?"

"From the outside or the inside?"

"Outside." They had reached the car; Mo Ran opened up one of the back doors and put Chu Wanning's things in the footwell.

"Oh, no, no, no – you want me to come up with the ideas, and then for you to get all the glory?" Chu Wanning walked around the car. "I'll break out myself. You'll probably have got yourself captured in your ill-thought-out, reckless attempt, so don't worry, I'll rescue you on the way out."

"No, no, I don't want to be the incompetent sidekick! I know, modernise it – maybe they're going to tail us, and I'll have to drive at breakneck speed to shake them."

"Mo Ran, if you drive at anything *approaching* 'breakneck speed' I will be the one breaking your neck."

"You got to go on the G-train today; *your* need for speed has been satisfied," Mo Ran said with performative sulkiness as he started the car. It was like dealing with a particularly angry cat. If you picked it up and tried to carry it, it'd scratch your face off. But if you acted aloof, as though you really didn't care about whether it followed you, while dropping little crumps of something it was interested in, it would follow you right where you wanted it to go. "Seriously though, I thought it was better to drive straight out, just in case, but if you want to stop let me know."

"No, I'm fine. I… thought that I would prefer to be on the road as well." Chu Wanning looked up, awkwardness settling on him again. "Do *you* want to stop?"

“Nah, I’m good. I used the bathroom while I was waiting for you. I also bought some food and drink, it’s just at your feet." Mo Ran checked his mirrors as he reversed out of the parking space. "This rain is such a pain. The road was like a river at some points... I'd prefer to get some miles under us before it gets dark, but we should be home by midnight. And if you want to get out of Chengdu as soon as possible as well we can always stop on the way for something hot.” Mo Ran grinned, eyes on the road as he turned out of the station carpark. “Temperature wise, I mean, not spiciness. Even if they did serve spicy food in the clinic, it’s in Shanghai, so it’s never going to compare really, is it? Was the food good?”

Silence.

“Shizun, was the food-” Mo Ran said again, and then glanced to his right.

He exhaled with a smile, touched, and warmth spread through his chest.

Chu Wanning had sat down, put on his seatbelt, and instantly fallen asleep.

Chapter 29: 'Cause I've Built My Life Around You

Chu Wanning's sleep was dreamless and cool; one second, they were encased in the rain in Chengdu, and in the next they were among the mountains. The sky above was stunning in the post-rain July sunset, a riot of salmon-pink and lilac and burning orange.

The engine switched off. Mo Ran was looking down at him with a smile. "You okay?"

The warm light painted his face in colours more beautiful than that of the sky.

Chu Wanning's nickname was that of a star, and it felt apt: glittering with cold light, maybe, but unfathomably distant. A small pinprick alone in the void of space, surrounded by darkness.

In contrast, Mo Ran was the sun itself, burning as hot as his name suggested, throwing out warmth and light with unquestioning generosity. Chu Wanning felt like a small, dull rock, caught helplessly in his orbit. It was purely a matter of gravity.

"Mn." Chu Wanning sat up in his seat and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "I'm sorry, that was so rude of me…"

"No, not at all. I'm glad you were able to sleep."

"I'd intended to on the train, but I had to keep calling Mr. Zhu…"

"Mr. Zhu?"

"Your uncle's lawyer. Then if I didn't call, they'd be able to work out what station I'd been taken off at."

Mo Ran's mouth twisted. "Well. Even better that you got some sleep now, then."

"I really didn't intend to…" Chu Wanning said. He stretched his legs and looked out of the window, taking in the Sinopec-branded petrol pumps. "Where are we?"

"Yingjing Services. About 45 minutes out of Ya'an. I thought you might like something to eat. And that you might want to be awake for the Labajin Bridge."

Chu Wanning perked up at that. "I would, actually. And…" His fingers splayed across his abdomen; he hadn't noticed until Mo Ran had mentioned it. "If *you* were hungry…"

Mo Ran grinned. "I'm starving. Let me fill the tank, and we'll park up."

The Art Diner didn't have a great deal of choice, but Chu Wanning settled on some Yuxiang shredded pork and Mo Ran ordered a portion of mapo tofu. The waitress smiled at them and said that she liked Chu Wanning's hair, making him want to curl up and disappear. Mutton dressed as lamb, he thought. First Mo Ran had clearly hated it, and now even this young girl was laughing at him…

As she walked away, Mo Ran leant forward with a wicked glint in his eye. "That's two women flirting with you in one day!"

Chu Wanning stabbed the back of Mo Ran's hand with his chopsticks, eliciting a shocked laugh. "Women flirting with me – and you flirting with death."

Mo Ran laughed again, and rested his chin on his hand, looking at Chu Wanning across the table. "Ahh, I missed you. No one else insults me so well. Xue Meng is so boring – just 'dog' this and 'dog' that."

Chu Wanning felt the heat of a blush itch up his neck. He looked down and busied himself with his pork. “That was a threat, not an insult. And once a week wasn’t enough for you?”

“Not nearly enough.”

Chu Wanning put a piece of food in his mouth, and suddenly realised. The tips of his chopsticks had touched Mo Ran’s hand.

And now they were touching his tongue.

The waitress hurried back, worried by the coughing fit that followed this thought. “Do you want some water?”

“Yes, please-” Mo Ran said, as Chu Wanning shook his head.

“Coke. Cans.”

She brought some cans from the fridge, and Chu Wanning watched her open them with watering eyes. “And some more chopsticks, please,” he croaked. “These are splintered.”

“Of course!”

“Did you choke on a splinter?” Mo Ran asked with outraged concern, and Chu Wanning felt like the worst person in the world.

“It’s fine.” He cleared his throat again, and thanked the waitress for the new chopsticks. “We should eat quickly, if you want to see Labajin before it gets too dark...” That was a much safer thought. He was on steadier ground there. “It’s a very interesting build. Because Sichuan is so prone to earthquakes you need to consider how much flexibility the columns will have instead of just how strong they are, but the concrete gives that shear-wall strength which the steel truss tube cross-bracing is able to bend *just* enough. The two largest spans are

two *hundred* metres tall. Isn't that incredible? There was an interesting paper published in the *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering* in 2020 that suggests adding battens in between L-plates, I'll send it to you."

"Hmm." Mo Ran was focussing on his mapo tofu. "Yeah. I'll have a read of that…"

"Hua Binan – my first doctoral student – he was obsessed with bridge building. We took some trips along the Yaxi Expressway, to see them all. That was all he wanted to do, but then in his second year he suddenly made the switch to biomedical engineering. It was very odd." Chu Wanning chewed a mouthful of rice thoughtfully. "He's a year or two older than me, but at that point I suppose he wasn't thirty yet, so a change of focus wasn't too unusual. But it was a very sudden shift, when he'd been so interested in bridges before. I tried to ask him why the change – I was worried that perhaps it was the pressure, with bridge collapses in the news, but he said no, he just wasn't interested in it anymore."

"I met him," Mo Ran said. "At the hospital."

Chu Wanning's stomach dropped. He didn't know why it gave him such a feeling of dread – Hua Binan and Mo Ran, in the same room, without him. Probably the feeling that if they spoke for more than a few moments, they'd both realise that they liked each other far more than Chu Wanning. It didn't bother him too much in Hua Binan's case – Chu Wanning already knew that Hua Binan didn't particularly like him – but Mo Ran… And Hua Binan was so good looking, tall and delicate-faced, with a soft voice and easy manners. "Mn."

"I'm sorry, I know he was your first student, but… Didn't warm to him," Mo Ran said casually, and warmed Chu Wanning's heart instead.

"Really? Why?"

"Hm. Not sure. I felt kind of…" Mo Ran considered it for a moment, for just long enough for Chu Wanning to realise he was *gossiping*, he was talking about someone behind their back, it was unkind and sly and he should feel guilty, and then all those thoughts were flung from his head when Mo Ran said, "I felt as though he was weighing me up, somehow. Like he was assessing me. Judging me. Like he's got a little… bookshelf, and he looks at you and decides what shelf he's going to put you on."

He shrugged. “Sorry. That doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” Chu Wanning said quietly. “No, it… it does, actually. I always felt… I mean, I never expected him to *like* me. No one likes me anyway, but it would have been especially hard for him, being supervised by someone younger, and he was only given to me because none of the other tutors agreed to take him. But even without that, I always felt that he was… watching me. Studying me. Waiting for me to make some kind of mistake, I suppose.”

Mo Ran was now looking across at him. “Of course people like you.”

“Of course, I’m sorry. The Xues have been very good to me.”

“No, no, that’s not what… They *like* you. They like your company.” Mo Ran was frowning. “*I* like you.”

If Mo Ran had taken out a gun and calmly shot him, Chu Wanning could not have been more stunned.

It didn’t feel like a bullet in his chest, though. It felt like an arrow had passed right between his ribs and embedded itself in the wood of the chair behind him, holding him pinned in an agony of anxiety.

He couldn’t run. He couldn’t move. With those three words, Mo Ran had snapped the bones of his legs. A dull roar was sounding in his ears, and the world around him seemed to fade away to mist. Only Mo Ran’s open, sincere face remained.

‘Like’ – that was what he had said. *I like you*.

A vague, tricky word. But one that could- could it mean-?

But no, no. The stress was wrong. The context was wrong. Mo Ran was saying that the Xues liked him, and liked his company, and that Mo Ran did as well. It wasn't… that *other* meaning of the word.

A great pit of despair opened up in Chu Wanning's chest.

Mo Ran liked him. He liked him.

And Chu Wanning was grateful for that. He *should* be grateful for that. Mo Ran had undergone a long drive, *hours* of driving, just for him, and then had told him that he liked him.

This was a culmination. Chu Wanning had spent years teaching Mo Ran – he had spent hours upon hours giving him private tuition, arguing his case in academic committees, making coffee for him, eating lunch with him.

And he had done all those things willingly! He had never thought of what Mo Ran might grant him; every one of those hours had been given without the least thought of anything in return.

He had put Mo Ran's dead weight on his bloody, raw back, and crawled on his hands and knees across broken glass and splinters of hot metal. Every night, he had to massage anti-scarring gel into his legs and arms and hands. Every night, he dreamt of the roar of the fire, the weight on his back, the urgency in his heart that propelled him forward.

For Mo Ran, he had stepped back from the ledge of that hospital roof.

And after all of that, Mo Ran liked him.

There was nothing else Chu Wanning could offer. He had given all that was within his power and strength to give. He had given Mo Ran both of their lives, and in return, Mo Ran liked him.

There was nothing left that Chu Wanning *could* give, and so… there was nothing more that Mo Ran could ever give either.

I like you was the death of hope.

It was a sick one, a wrong one. But it had been Chu Wanning's secret hope, hidden and nursed in his broken heart, and now it was dead.

"Mn," he said, giving a trembling smile, and to his utter horror, his eyes filled with tears. "That's- you're very kind-"

It had died at a plastic table in the Art Diner, under fluorescent lights, in the Yingjing Service Area.

"*Shizun,*" Mo Ran said, reaching across the table; Chu Wanning's hand flinched away. Mo Ran looked distraught, as well he might – Chu Wanning was equally appalled by his rudeness.

"I have to-" he said, finally scrambling to his feet; he knocked the chair back. "I'm just tired- piece of chilli went down the wrong way- I'll just-"

He fled to the toilets. They were disgusting; the grout between the tiles was brown, and there was a puddle on the floor under the sink. The sight of it shocked the tears out of Chu Wanning; they fell, but his eyes didn't fill again.

Disgusting. Disgusting. Disgusting.

He was tired. That was it. It had been a long, long day, one of worry and tension.

No. That was no excuse.

He wiped his cheeks, hands shaking, and he rubbed his palms on his t-shirt.

It was utterly disgusting of him, to make Mo Ran feel upset, to react to his kindness in such a way. His paranoia had ruined the train journey, but it paled in significance in comparison to how his hideous expectations and demands, his atrocious *neediness* and his despicable desire for love, had ruined this drive as well.

He ruined everything he touched.

He went back out into the diner, and calmly sat down at the table. “I apologise for that.”

“It’s fine,” Mo Ran said, his face giving the lie to it. It clearly wasn’t.

Look at how manipulative you are. Look at how you’re trying to extract more from him.

This was his own fault. Mo Ran couldn’t know; he didn’t deserve that. He deserved as much attention and affection as before. More. Chu Wanning had to act completely normally, and show him how much he cared about him.

“Did you know the Yaxi Expressway rises 7.5 metres for every kilometre?” Chu Wanning said.

Mo Ran blinked at him.

“Hm, yes. Um, I know we’ve talked about the Labajin Bridge, but there’s also of course the Ganhaizi Bridge. It’s not as innovative as the Labajin Bridge’s SRC columns, but it’s still pretty experimental because it’s almost entirely made of steel tubing, instead of the concrete H-frame ladder piers that you mostly find.”

He brought his pill case out of his pocket, and measured out a dose of propranolol. “I read that it- it’s the world’s longest concrete filled steel tubular truss bridge, *and* it has the world’s highest bridge piers of concrete filled steel tubular lattice. And- and that’s not even discussing the Ganhaizi and Tiezhaizi dual spiral tunnels…”

“What’s so special about the tunnels?” Mo Ran asked gently.

“Oh, um – do you have a pen? I’ll draw it out for you.”

Mo Ran suggested that they finish quickly and get back on the road before another rainstorm started up. It was too dark to really appreciate the skyroad of the Yaxi Expressway. It was like driving through a void.

Chu Wanning couldn’t help but feel responsible for that as well.

They turned off the G5 at Shimian (after a stop to use the toilets, Chu Wanning having checked and assessed them), and the road was immediately different – winding, sparsely-lit, and often overhung by the rocks of the mountains. Mo Ran slowed them right down, and kept the high-beam lights on.

“I hate driving this in the dark,” he said, and then quickly added. “Not that I mind! But it’ll be a while yet before we get home, if it’s taken nearly two hours from Shimian. There’s no way we’ll be home before one.”

“I’m sorry; it’s been such a long day.”

“My own fault. I underestimated the rain. But you sleep, Shizun, honestly.”

Did Mo Ran want him to sleep? Probably, after his display at the services. “I’m all right. Besides, I just…”

There was something keeping him awake, beyond his shame over his emotional display. Something in the air – something in the vibrations of the car.

They passed through Yuliang Village. Chu Wanning peered out of the windscreen, studying the silhouettes of the mountains.

“Are you okay?”

“Mn. Just… Slow and steady, Mo Ran.”

Mo Ran dropped the speed a little more. “Are you worried about landslides?”

It was quite amazing, how Mo Ran could sometimes be so oblivious, and sometimes could read Chu Wanning’s mind. “Mn,” he replied. “There’s just been so much rain, and… I don’t know.” Then, as they emerged from the Yuliang Tunnel – “Wait. Stop for a moment.”

Mo Ran drew to a stop, and Chu Wanning frowned in concentration. He opened the door. “Could you turn off the engine for a second?”

“What is it?”

“Just above, on the slope. That… bulge. It just looks wrong…”

Chu Wanning stepped out into the humid night.

The swollen earth wasn’t moving, but it was too dark now to trust his eyes. He closed them, and listened…

He catalogued the rustling of wind in the trees – *not enough trees here* – and the plants, easily tuning them out. There, far away to his right, and far above them…

Crack. Pop. Pop. Crack. Pop. Crack.

And below it all, a growing rumble.

He dove back into the car. “Reverse! Into the tunnel!” he said, putting his seatbelt back on.

Mo Ran turned on the engine and twisted around. He looked through the back window and reversed the car, speeding them back into the Yuliang Tunnel.

He drove them halfway, and then stopped.

Chu Wanning gripped the dashboard as the silence lengthened. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, as he realised, with growing embarrassment, that he’d been wrong.

It was his own wretched paranoia, *again*. Mo Ran must think he was as easily startled as a cat, as given to flights of anxiety, demanding everyone jump to the second he ordered it. It was barely a step then to deliberate attention-seeking.

Was that what he was doing? Was it all some childish subconscious stamping of the foot – *pay attention to me!* Mo Ran was going to think he was completely-

And then, with a sudden roar, the mountain collapsed in front of them.

They watched in total silence as earth and rocks came spilling into the tunnel. They turned in their seats at the same time and smacked their heads together, but the other end of the tunnel showed the road and the night.

Mo Ran had driven out to pick him up, and they could both have-

They weren't trapped, but they had been just *seconds*-

Mo Ran reversed the car slowly, looking in the rearview mirror to make sure the other end remained clear. The final few stones clattered and bounced in the beam of the headlights.

The rumbling settled, and the earth stopped.

Mo Ran exhaled. "Well, *fuck*."

Chapter 30: A Thousand Eons to Share the Same Pillow

Chapter Summary

> I'm sorry this chapter was a couple of days later than usual, and the next one will be as well - unfortunately I have to visit family this weekend. I can't believe a single day has taken four chapters! 😭😅 But I have been so looking forward to the result... 😈

Yuliang Village was tiny, no more than twenty houses, with a small shop attached to a restaurant and bar.

Despite the late hour, a gaggle of small children were sat outside, gathered around a smartphone on which one of the older boys was playing a loud, flashing game. However, the arrival of a BMW trumped this for entertainment, and the game was swiftly abandoned.

“I’ll let you sit in it later!” Mo Ran promised, making sure to lock it lest any of the kids get up to mischief. “Do you have a Party Secretary? Village head? Inside?”

A little girl took him by the hand to lead him in; Mo Ran bent at the waist obligingly. He didn’t miss the strange look that Chu Waning gave him and silently replied with a shrug and a smile.

“No, no, I…” Chu Wanning waved his hand. “Doesn’t matter.”

The average age inside the place must have been about sixty, and that only because of the presence of children, sleeping in their grandparents’ laps or playing on phones. A handful of the older women were wearing broad-striped skirts in black and crimson. There was one small group of young people, presumably visiting during the college break, all gathered around one table. Mo Ran prayed that none of them went to Sisheng, but he couldn’t recognise anyone at first glance.

The chatter died instantly as they stepped inside, though the sounds of the KTV screen in the side-room continued.

“Sorry to disturb,” Mo Ran said. He squeezed the little girl’s hand, then let go and stood up straight. “There was a landslide on the road; the Yuliang Tunnel’s completely blocked.”

This stirred up the room, and an old man with a thin white beard immediately stepped forward. The college students were marshalled to block off the road leading to the tunnel, while the village head went to phone Shimian for help.

Duty done, Mo Ran was seriously tempted by the bottles of baijiu that dotted the tables. But Chu Wanning looked as tired as Mo Ran felt, and Mo Ran felt dead on his feet. He asked whether there was a guesthouse, and one of the oldest women gave him a key.

“Kax-sha-sha,” Chu Wanning said softly, and elicited a chorus of delight from the old women.

“Ne xix hmi?”

“Ngax li Chu Wanning nge, cyx li Mo Ran nge. Ngax Chep-du da la, Wuchang bbo.”

They laughed at his pronunciation, the guesthouse-owner reaching over to pat his arm. “He, cuop-luo he!”

“Kax-sha-sha.” Chu Wanning smiled awkwardly. “That’s largely the extent of my Nuosu, I’m afraid…”

“Aiya, it’s all right, it’s all right. It’s difficult for northerners to pronounce. The house is my son’s, he’s in the city too, you can both stay in there.”

Even in the midst of his exhaustion, Mo Ran felt warmth and wonder. Stepping back out into the darkness, he leant over to press his arm to Chu Wanning's. "Aiming for a third conquest of the day?"

"She's a little too young for me," Chu Wanning said, surprising a snort out of Mo Ran.

It was a disservice, that each joke still caught him by surprise; he remembered when he used to think that Chu Wanning was utterly humourless. That so hot a body and so beautiful a face were wasted on a black hole of a personality. The Mo Ran of a year ago was blind as well as stupid. Arrogant and self-absorbed.

He hated to think about him, but Mo Ran forced himself to. He tried to recognise when his mind shied away in disgust from those memories, and made himself sit in the discomfort for just a second, messaging his uncle as they walked.

He never wanted to return to being that person again.

The 'guesthouse' was a modern, concrete building – Mo Ran guessed it had been built after the 2008 earthquake. It had two floors, the bottom of which was made up of one large room for tool storage, cooking, and eating, and a smaller bathroom.

It was a bare building, the walls made of unpainted concrete, but it had electricity and running water, and at this point that was all that Mo Ran cared about.

Behind him, he heard a small sound of satisfaction. He followed Chu Wanning's gaze, and saw, on the wall above the kitchen table, a Night Guardian.

Chu Wanning pressed a button on its side, and a shrill noise rang out. "Good. The batteries still have power…"

"Put up in pride of place right next to the General Secretary," Mo Ran said, referring to the glossy picture of Xi Jinping, and wiping away an imaginary tear.

Chu Wanning elbowed him in the ribs. The slight quirk of his lip transformed his face, cracking the ice of cold perfection into living water, and in the heavy heat of the Sichuan summer, cool water was all that Mo Ran could think about.

"Bedrooms must be upstairs."

It was rude, but Mo Ran rushed to be the first to climb the stairs. He didn't think he would be able to cope with Chu Wanning climbing ahead of him, Mo Ran's eyes on a level with his arse.

He was still aggressively trying not to think of it when he came to the upstairs room.

Room.

Bed*room*.

There was one bedroom upstairs.

And it only had one bed.

All of Chu Wanning's low-lidded exhaustion was gone; he stared at the double bed in horror.

There was no sofa. No rugs or carpets. No spare mattress or even a spare cover.

"You take it," Mo Ran said. "Obviously."

“Don’t be stupid,” Chu Wanning said, though he sounded as though he’d just been informed of his own execution. “It’s large enough. I mean. It’s…”

“I mean it too,” Mo Ran said. “If you feel uncomfortable…”

“Do you think I’d feel more comfortable on the concrete floor?”

“I’d go on the floor.”

“Do you think I’d feel more comfortable with *you* sleeping on the floor?” Chu Wanning snapped, eyes flashing dangerously. “You must have a pretty low opinion of me.”

Mo Ran couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, okay! I think the world of you. That’s why I had to offer.”

“Oh, just shut up!” Chu Wanning stormed out. “Where’s my bag?”

“In the car; I’ll fetch it,” Mo Ran said.

Keep busy. *Keep busy*. Sharing a bed – normal, perfectly normal. It was- They were going to fall asleep immediately, they were both so tired. Obviously. It was going to be fine.

You’re going to die, Mo Ran’s more intelligent brain told him.

He opened up the boot and stared into it for a while.

Shit. SHIT. Chu Wanning might have his things, but Mo Ran had thought he was going to be back that same night. What was he going to *wear*?

Thank *fuck* he'd come straight from the gym! Shit! He had his dirty gym clothes and a spare t-shirt, along with spare boxers and spare socks. And soap.

Mo Ran hurriedly brought Chu Wanning's bags up, and then escaped down to the bathroom. Despite the fact that it was approaching one in the morning, he washed his dirty t-shirt, shorts, socks and towel as well as he could – in the Sichuan humidity it was too much to hope for that they would be dry by the morning, but it might mean they were acceptable if they had to stay a second night. It was likely, given the size of the landslide.

He didn't want to admit it to himself, but part of him was hoping that he would be giving Chu Wanning enough time to fall asleep first. If Chu Wanning was asleep, then nothing could happen.

Not that anything could happen anyway.

Simple. Easy.

Unfortunately, Chu Wanning came into the bathroom himself, holding out a bowl. "Could I have some water, please?"

Mo Ran obligingly filled it, and Chu Wanning retreated again.

It was going to be fine. They could roll up a cover, perhaps, put a barrier down the middle. Yes, Mo Ran thought. Yes, that would work.

He climbed the stairs as quietly as possible, so that he wouldn't wake Chu Wanning if he were asleep.

It meant that Chu Wanning didn't turn around when he came to the doorway.

All inappropriate thoughts of how he was going to keep his hands to himself vanished like a bubble popping.

Mo Ran remembered the feeling of Chu Wanning's body under his hands, amid the neon-lit snowflakes. He remembered the hard muscles, the slim, firm waist.

He remembered the silk-smooth skin of his back, when his hand had inched up under Chu Wanning's jumper and shirt. He had pulled Chu Wanning's waist towards himself, hips pressed together, while pushing his head back with his kiss against the rough brick wall. Chu Wanning had been off-balance, suddenly gripping at Mo Ran's jacket to hold himself upright, instead of pushing him away and trying to escape.

All gone.

Chu Wanning had brought his long hair over his right shoulder. Mo Ran could see Chu Wanning's ribs, the small hills and dips of his spine.

But they did not draw the eye.

Chu Wanning's back was a mottled map of burn scars. On the white seas were continents of brown and pink; there were stretched plains and ridges of mountains. It made Mo Ran think of the moon: a bright surface pitted with flaming impact marks.

The worst of it was congregated on Chu Wanning's left shoulder. Here the scarring looked most sore; the edges were inflamed and red, and the skin looked painfully tight. There were incongruous patches of paler, smoother skin, like semi-rectangular fields. They must be the skin grafts.

A cotton t-shirt was laid out on the bed, and on this, several sheets, made of some kind of gel, like semi-transparent plasters or bandages, each about the size of a small notepad. Chu Wanning was holding one of these, contorting himself trying to place one on his shoulder.

Mo Ran felt a swift stab of hurt and anger. Why was Chu Wanning trying to dress his own shoulder, when Mo Ran was there? Was Mo Ran really so easy to forget?

What the fuck was he even doing out of the clinic yet? How could he have spent hours on a train, hours in a car, with his back like that? Not a word in the restaurant, except- except for that strange spasm. His eyes had filled with tears, and he'd fled to the bathroom. Had it been pain? Mo Ran had thought it had been surprise at his words, but…

But what the fuck was Chu Wanning thinking? *Why*? Mo Ran hadn't realised he still needed dressings – who was going to put his dressing on his back for him? He clearly couldn't do it himself!

Chu Wanning, *what is wrong with you?* What was it going to take for him to ask someone for help?

He'd been so excited for Chu Wanning to leave the clinic. Now he was in half a mind to throw him in the boot of the car and drive him straight back to Shanghai himself.

"What are you doing?" he asked, not even trying to keep his anger from his voice.

Then Chu Wanning turned around, and his righteous fury died.

Chu Wanning looked so shocked, and so… ashamed. He reached out for his t-shirt, and then remembered the other dressings on them; he stood up instead, turning his back to the wall, and stepped away from Mo Ran.

Mo Ran's throat was seized by the memory of the video that Xue Meng had shown him. Shi Mei, advancing, hands out, and Chu Wanning, pressing his back to the wall.

The heat of anger turned into ice, dropping like a rock into his gut. He held his hands out to the sides. "What- what are you doing?" he asked, making his voice as quiet and as gentle as possible.

Chu Wanning had wrapped his arms around his chest, like a maiden caught by a pool. They didn't entirely cover the scar over his heart, this one old and pale in comparison.

It was shaped like a crescent moon.

Huaizui hadn't just stabbed him. He'd tried to carve the heart out of him.

Mo Ran was gripped by a fit of nausea at the realisation; he tasted vomit at the back of his throat, and swallowed it.

Unfortunately, not subtly enough.

Chu Wanning saw him.

He looked like he had just been stabbed again.

"You should have knocked," he said flatly. "You should have… I didn't hear you."

"I thought you might be asleep. I didn't know you had to… Why didn't you ask me for help?"

"Why would I?" Chu Wanning's thin mouth twisted. "Just the sight of it is disgusting enough."

"No, no. It wasn't that. It was- It's not disgusting."

"Shut up!" Chu Wanning's neck was red. "Don't lie to me!"

“It’s not! I’m *not*. It was- Huaizui curved it,” Mo Ran tried to explain helplessly. He held his hand as though he was holding a knife, stabbed down, and pulled.

Chu Wanning flinched. He looked down, and moved his hand to cover his scar. Then he stared at the floor, jaw tight, lashes lowered.

Nowhere to turn, Mo Ran realised. Front or back, he was scarred, and so he had nowhere to hide. All he could do was hide his eyes instead.

He reached out. Carefully. Slowly. He’d reached out like this five months before, in the February air on a hospital roof.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked for the third time. “I’d have driven slower. We could have stopped somewhere. I can dress it for you.”

“I don’t want you to look at it,” Chu Wanning said. His voice was harsh, but without even a t-shirt to hide himself, Mo Ran could see how he was trembling. "*You*... I don't want you to look at it."

“Why not? If not for you, I’d look at it every day in the mirror,” Mo Ran said. “If not for you, if I’d survived, that would be my face…”

“Don’t. Don’t try to make it something else.”

“It *is* something else.”

“It’s ugly.”

“Not to me. It saved me.”

Chu Wanning was still looking away. Mo Ran decided to change tack.

“If it was me, who’d taken the brunt of that bomb... If my face was scarred, or my back, and I asked you to help me dress it, would you say that it was ugly and disgusting and refuse?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why do you think I would?” He remembered what Chu Wanning had said about the bed. “You must have a pretty low opinion of me.”

“It’s *different*,” Chu Wanning hissed.

“How?” he asked, but received no reply. He’d not really expected one. “It’s not ugly. It’s not disgusting. The only thing it makes me feel is grateful to you, for taking it for me, and pain, that it’s hurting you. Please. Please, let me help.” Mo Ran glanced back at the t-shirt on the bed. “What are they?”

“Cica-care sheets.” Chu Wanning’s voice was a whisper. Mo Ran suddenly hated that the house only had bright overhead lights, the kind that Chu Wanning found most difficult to bear; he raised his hand to shield Chu Wanning’s eyes, and surprised him into looking up at him.

He looked down again immediately, but it was something.

“What are they?”

“They’re silicone sheets. They’re… elasticated, basically. You stick them to the scars, and it pulls the skin tight. Stops the wounds from stretching other further. Makes them less likely to become keloid.”

“If they pull the skin tight, aren’t they painful?”

“No.”

“Shizun.”

“No. Not… not *painful*. Uncomfortable. You start with an hour a day and then work your way up to twenty-three over time. You have to wash them every few hours, or the oils in the skin make the adhesive unstick…”

“Right. And you’re trying to put these ones back on?”

“Mn.”

Mo Ran looked at them again. “*How*, if they’re meant to be taut?” He narrowed his eyes. “Did you tell them that you had someone to do it for you? So you could leave?”

Chu Wanning’s silence told him everything he needed to know.

“Right,” he said. “Sit down. I’ll do them.”

“Mo Ran-”

“No excuses. I want to sleep. You want to sleep. So sit down.” Mo Ran kept his voice firm, and to his surprise, Chu Wanning sighed with something like…

Something like… relief?

Was that what was written in the smoothing of his features, the relaxing of his shoulders as he sat down?

Chu Wanning showed him how to pull the sheets taut and told him where to stick them. They were mostly on the left shoulder, but a couple on incisions elsewhere. It must have been painful, but Chu Wanning didn't make a sound. By the time they had finished it was half past two, and even with the bright lights, he was falling asleep sitting up.

Mo Ran helped him into a clean t-shirt and pyjama shorts from his bag. Chu Wanning's knees and shins were also criss-crossed with scars; Chu Wanning murmured something about a gel, but fell asleep before he could finish it, curling up on his side and covering his eyes with a scarred forearm.

Mo Ran folded Chu Wanning's clothes. He stripped down to his boxers, and then thought better of it, and kept his t-shirt on.

He turned off the light.

The bed creaked atrociously as he lay down on it.

Or maybe it didn't, because Chu Wanning didn't wake up. His just lay curled in on himself, breathing softly, his back to Mo Ran.

Chapter 31: Guilt and Innocence

Mo Ran couldn't sleep.

How could he? In what world could he sleep, with Chu Wanning inches from him, warm and soft in slumber?

Mo Ran didn't like to think about the night he drugged Chu Wanning. He could think about the bomb, he could think about the hospital, he could think about those two shitty cops and Chu Wanning's heartbreaking story about his supervisor. He could think about the roof and the void, and the feeling of Chu Wanning in his arms, sobbing into the crook of his neck.

But that other night, the night of the drug… That was different.

Part of it was guilt. Most of it. It was guilt that was well deserved. He'd lured Chu Wanning out of his flat by asking him a favour – asking him to read over a dissertation chapter. That was the only thing that would work. Mo Ran had known it and used it. Chu Wanning couldn't bear to pass up an opportunity to help a student.

He had played the Orphan Card. He'd said that he couldn't bear the – fictitious – unkind comments of his uncle's family, and Chu Wanning, eyes fixed on the ground, had murmured that he understood the difficulties. Mo Ran had replied that it was nice to talk to someone who understood the nausea of obligation and gratitude, who understood what it was like to have someone tell you that you owed them for the food in your stomach and the clothes on your back…

He'd not intended to say that. Because that was true. He'd regretted the truth far more than the lies.

Chu Wanning had told him about his guardian, and Mo Ran had accidentally shared a glimpse of Mo Guiying. He'd taken Chu Wanning's arm, and Chu Wanning hadn't pulled away. Chu Wanning had been embarrassed that he'd been alone all over the New Year's holiday (he'd been all alone, all through that holiday, with Mo Ran drinking and eating and

laughing and then lying about it), and Mo Ran… Mo Ran had reassured him that he wasn't alone anymore.

Mo Ran felt sick. He rolled over in the bed and faced the blank, dirty wall. He didn't even deserve to *look* at Chu Wanning.

He had used Chu Wanning's trust and kindness. He had strung him along through the worst meal Mo Ran had ever eaten. And Chu Wanning had spoken to him with such excitement about fencing, talking about the physicality and speed of it, making Mo Ran imagine him shaking off pain and injury in the adrenaline and competition of a fight.

Mo Ran had conned himself that Chu Wanning was thinking about sex, was flirting, was deliberately winding him up. Already formulating an excuse for what he was going to do. But Chu Wanning really was just that innocent, absolutely unaware of any *double entendres*. Mo Ran had coined the nickname 'The Sexless Savant' in malice, but it was true, wasn't it?

But all Mo Ran could think about were those words: much faster, much more aggressive, much more painful. By that point, the current had been irresistible. Mo Ran's hand had shaken as he poured the whole of that tiny bottle into Chu Wanning's drink.

And the worst thing was that he'd not been thinking about Shi Mei at all.

All he had been thinking about was his need. He had felt it like a man dying of thirst needed water, and when Chu Wanning, dazed by the drug, had leant back his head and bared his long, white throat – traced the line of it with an ice cube – the wolf in Mo Ran had taken over.

He'd planned and he'd lured and he'd coaxed like a rapist. And he'd done it completely consciously and completely willingly. Until then, he thought, he'd acted like a sexual predator. But in that moment he became one.

He got up from the bed. In that moment, he couldn't bear how close he was to Chu Wanning, vulnerable and oblivious. It wasn't that he didn't trust himself, but he *shouldn't* trust himself.

Chu Wanning needed and deserved protection, and the person he needed it most from was the person he felt comfortable enough and trusting enough to sleep with.

Not sleep with! *SLEEP* with- Engage in the act of SLEEPING- *Fuck!*

He paced up and down. The concrete was cold and vaguely, horribly damp.

All the time, Chu Wanning had agonised over whether he was being inappropriate, conscious of the difference in power and status between them. While Mo Ran had kept in his pocket a far more real and far more potent difference in power. Chu Wanning had been so worried about accidentally crossing a boundary in his head, one he maintained with more rigidity than any other doctoral supervisor on the planet, and all the while Mo Ran had been deliberately launching himself over boundaries like they were hurdles in a race towards damnation.

The thought of that night made Mo Ran *sick* with self-loathing. It bubbled up like acid in his throat and escaped from his tear ducts. He covered his hand with his mouth, afraid of waking Chu Wanning.

He remembered his fury, when Chu Wanning hadn't recognised him. He should have been worried about what the drug was doing to his victim, and instead he'd been hurt.

"Who else would it be? Huh? Who else do you think I'd be? Shi Mei?" is what he had asked.

What he had been thinking was, *How dare you not recognise* me*? Look at* me*! Pay attention to* me*! Only ME.*

But no. The worst thing about that night…

The ice, the snowflakes falling, that powder blue jumper…

Powder blue wool under his fingertips, the sensation of a snowflake melting on his ear…

There was something there that he couldn't quite capture, two dots that his brain refused to connect.

No. The *worst* thing…

He remembered what Chu Wanning's mouth had tasted like. He remembered the smell of his skin, the silkiness of his hair.

Worst of all, he remembered what Chu Wanning sounded like. The cry of pain when Mo Ran smacked his head against the wall, the way his eyes had rolled back. He remembered Chu Wanning moaning through tears –

"Mo Ran, you- you can't. I'm your teacher*…"*

The worst thing was that same words that now made him want to weep with guilt also aroused him more than anything else he'd ever heard. Even now. Especially now. How could he feel so sick with guilt and still want to wake Chu Wanning, shove him down into the mattress, and make him moan those words again?

What kind of monster was he?

He made up his mind to sleep on the concrete, like the dog he was. He went back to the bed to grab a pillow just as Chu Wanning turned over, and his hand fell onto the bare stretch of mattress where Mo Ran had been lying.

"Mo Ran?"

He sat bolt upright, two-thirds asleep, and cried out at the stretch in his shoulder.

“I’m here,” Mo Ran said quickly. “I’m here – right here.”

“He-” Chu Wanning sucked down a hideous-sounding breath, eyes fixed on Mo Ran’s chest. “He was- I thought he-”

Mo Ran carefully sat down. “No one’s here. It’s just me.” Chu Wanning’s darting gaze reminded him of the mugging in the alleyway; he took his hand, and placed it flat over his heart. “See? Absolutely fine…”

Chu Wanning sighed. His eyes were already fluttering closed again, but his breathing was shallow. “I thought… There were rocks… And the, the knife…”

“No knife. And no rocks here. All fine on the rocks front, thanks to you.” Chu Wanning had fisted his hand in the cotton of Mo Ran’s t-shirt, so he carefully eased himself onto the bed again. “It’s just the adrenaline from earlier, Wanning – everything’s fine. You just need to breathe.”

He gently pushed Chu Wanning back down. “Breathe in. That’s it. And out. That’s good. That’s just right. That’s really good.”

Chu Wanning relaxed into the mattress. He didn’t curl up again. “Good?”

He was still mostly asleep. His eyes were soft and his lids heavy with it, but he was looking up at Mo Ran with such a searching, open, shocked expression that it tickled something in the back of Mo Ran’s brain. Something that itched, that made him want to sneeze…

That made him completely forget the guilt and the self-loathing, and made him want to tell Chu Wanning a thousand times how good he was, how good he felt, and to see that expression in response every time…

“So good,” he whispered as he lay down. “You’re doing so well. Breathing so well.”

“Nn.” Chu Wanning raised his left arm and covered his closed eyes. Hiding his face. But he didn’t let go of Mo Ran’s t-shirt either.

“So good for me,” Mo Ran said in breathless wonder. And Chu Wanning shook his head and pulled him closer.

Well. Well.

Well.

No! No – he had to be *respectful*, innocent and pure. Chu Wanning was falling back into a deeper sleep again, apparently reassured by holding onto Mo Ran’s t-shirt, which unfortunately left Mo Ran trapped and feeling like a bike with his wheel-stand kicked down.

He tried to ease onto his back. He could *not* let his erect dick touch Chu Wanning.

Quite apart from it not being part of his “Respect” Agenda, he thought it might explode if it did, and he only had one pair of shorts to last him for however long they were going to be stuck in Yuliang.

*

Chu Wanning woke up from an uneasy sleep, one marred with sudden jolts of adrenaline as his dreams kept being interrupted by landslides. It made no sense; the landslide the night before had been a slow, inexorable thing. They’d had to wait for it. But in his dreams, they happened with the unexpected instantaneousness of…

Well. Of a bomb going off.

Marvellous.

But every time he jerked awake, he had felt a weight on the mattress beside him, felt the heat like that of a furnace, even heard a quiet snore, and easily he fell asleep again.

He must have been married in a previous life, he thought, eyes still firmly shut. He'd have imagined that sharing a bed would be something uncomfortable and repulsive, but instead he had actually felt strangely… comforted by a presence next to him.

Maybe it was only because it was Mo Ran. He should have been on pins all night, to sleep next to Mo Ran, but instead it had just felt… safe. He had felt safe.

You're delusional, he suddenly thought, his inner voice perfectly hydrochloric. *It's because you slept three to a bed in the Children's Welfare Institute. That's why it feels familiar. 'Married in a past life' – is that what you're relying on now, to feel less pathetic?*

The mattress suddenly felt thin and lumpy. Chu Wanning opened his eyes, and realised two things: first, that it was morning, and second, that Mo Ran was nowhere to be seen.

But he could be heard. Some Mandarin pop song from the room below, which Mo Ran considerately stopped singing as he began to climb the stairs.

"Ah, you're awake!"

Mo Ran's hair was wet. He'd scraped it into a tiny, messy bun on the back of his head, showing off his undercut. But his t-shirt was dry, so he must have changed, if it was raining outside, or had a shower.

Chu Wanning sat up, feeling wrong-footed and slightly embarrassed. He would have preferred to be the first to wake, to steal away to the bathroom on his own. "What time is it?"

“Not too late. About ten. Perfect time for breakfast.”

Mo Ran held out a plastic tray and Chu Wanning stared at the deep-fried doughsticks and plastic bowl of soymilk blearily.

“Where the hell did you get those?”

“That little shop, where we were last night. I know how much you like soymilk, so I thought it’d be a nice sweet breakfast.”

Chu Wanning frowned. Mo Ran wasn’t annoyed by him sleeping in? Didn’t think he was lazy?

Mo Ran had brought him breakfast in bed?

He wanted to ask what he hell Mo Ran wanted, but he was looking at him so proudly. Happily. Even Chu Wanning wasn’t so cruel as to intentionally ruin that. Highly confused, he took the tray. “Thank you…”

Mo Ran beamed at him. He looked tired; there were shadows under his eyes, the light purple bringing out the strange dark gleam of his eyes. “I wanted to sweeten you up,” he said, and winked; Chu Wanning felt relieved, and threw a pillow at him. “Hey, we’re going to need them! I went and spoke to the village head. Good news is that they’ve got through to Chengdu, and they’re sending a digger. Eat a doughstick.”

Chu Wanning tore one in half. “I feel like you’re building towards a ‘but’…”

Mo Ran laughed. “*But*. There were two more landslides between us and there, so the digger’s going to have to clear them first. They think it’ll be a week before it gets here.”

“A *week*?”

“I told you to eat the doughstick! Yes, about a week. And one of the slides was between here and Shimian, so we can’t turn around and try a different route.”

Chu Wanning quartered the stick. “Was anyone hurt?”

Mo Ran’s face clouded over a little. “Don’t know, but the one closest to Shimian took out some cars and houses, so it’s possible.”

He felt ashamed, that it hadn’t been his first question. But then Mo Ran continued, “I’m afraid I didn’t actually think to ask. I’m not as compassionate as you. I was mainly worried about buying food.”

“More sensible than me,” Chu Wanning said. He felt like a cat whose coat Mo Ran had just smoothed. “And you’re very compassionate. Thank you, for the breakfast. It was very kind of you.”

Mo Ran perked up again, and sat on the bed. “Can I nick one of those?”

“You haven’t eaten?”

“No, I wanted to make sure you did first. I bought some bits, and some wet wipes for if you wanted a wash; the shower does work, but it, er… may need a scrub.”

Chu Wanning noticed the sidelong look Mo Ran was giving him. “I’m not so precious as to not be able to cope with a little bit of dirt, Mo Ran.”

“You can share it with the rat, then,” he retorted, and laughed at Chu Wanning’s expression. “No, honestly, it’s gross. I don’t think anyone’s lived here for a few months, and the humidity’s not been kind to it. It’s raining again, so the village head said that tomorrow we

can go and start digging ourselves, but it's too dangerous today. I thought I'd attack the shower instead, make us some meals."

The Mo Ran of a year ago would have been whining by now, grumpy and put-out. This Mo Ran was cheerful, practical, forward-thinking. He knew he had no right to, but Chu Wanning felt his heart glow with pride.

Then another thought occurred. "I have some spare t-shirts, spare trousers. They might fit…"

"I couldn't take them."

"They're clean!" Chu Wanning said, staring down at the bowl of soymilk. Then he recovered his senses. "Though I mean- of course, it's- you're quite right, it's not appropriate-"

"Unlike sharing a bed," Mo Ran said with a wicked smile – a smile that vanished when he saw Chu Wanning's expression. "No, no, sorry! I'm being an idiot. You are always the absolute paragon of appropriateness, Shizun, I promise! No, I was more thinking about… Well. I'm a little broader than you."

Oh. Of course. Clothes hung on Chu Wanning like rags on a stick, while Mo Ran's physique was sculpted as much as David's had been by Michaelangelo.

"But, but if you really don't mind, I'll try them – we're not too dissimilar in size really, they might just be a bit short-" Mo Ran said hastily.

Chu Wanning, locked firmly into the awkwardness now, fished out one of his larger t-shirts from his bag. Mo Ran gamely tried it on, but the seams stretched across his back, and the hems of the sleeves dug into his biceps with visibly painful tightness.

"It's perfect," Mo Ran said, and Chu Wanning nearly threw the tray at him.

“Don’t be so stupid! Take it off, right now. Idiot.”

Chu Wanning was the real idiot; he turned around to let Mo Ran change back into his own shirt, but not quickly enough.

The sight of Mo Ran’s perfect back set his whole head on fire.

He had muscles that Chu Wanning hadn’t even known *existed*, unless he’d fallen asleep at his desk or on the floor and felt an ache in them the day after.

And his *skin*… A perfect golden honey-brown, immaculate, shining across those clearly delineated rises and dips. The dimples above his waistband that matched those in his cheeks. The firm line of his waist, the breadth of his shoulders that contained easy power and practised strength.

The fire turned to ice.

That Mo Ran, whose back looked like *that*, had seen Chu Wanning’s… Had stretched the care bandages to contain the rot from spreading further across his skin, had touched the puckered and pitted scars…

He felt *sick* with shame.

The doughsticks in the soymilk now looked nauseating. Chu Wanning hurriedly put the bowl back on the tray. “I’ll take this down.”

“I can do it!”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Chu Wanning clenched his jaw. “You said that you’d bought wipes?”

“Yes, they’re downstairs-”

“Fine.” Chu Wanning snatched his t-shirt back, and hunted in his bag for his toiletries. He went down the stairs without a sound.

In the harsh light of day, he saw that Mo Ran was right: Chu Wanning wouldn’t have been able to brave the shower. He used the wipes instead, a cat’s lick and a promise of a wash, blushing furiously all the while, and then took out his nail scissors.

When he emerged, Mo Ran was sitting at the table, demolishing the rest of the doughsticks. Chu Wanning shoved the t-shirt against his chest.

“Ah- Um, it was a *little* bit tight-”

“The sleeves are gone,” Chu Wanning said. He dropped them onto the table. “I haven’t hemmed it, but it’ll be something, if you… get… wet…”

Over one of the chairs was a large, black t-shirt.

Chu Wanning stared at it.

Mo Ran rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah, you see, Uncle called me yesterday when I was at the gym, so I had my dirty clothes with me and I washed them last night…”

“Give me back the t-shirt.”

Mo Ran clutched it to his chest. “No!”

“It’s mine!”

“You gave it to me!”

“You already have a spare,” Chu Wanning said, in the same tone of voice that an aggrieved wife might accuse her husband of having a mistress.

“I need another one!” Mo Ran began to pull his own t-shirt off, and Chu Wanning turned his back with a strangled cry of fury. “You made it for me, so I’m putting it on, and you can’t take it back!”

“*Mo Ran*!”

“You wouldn’t be so *rude*,” Mo Ran said, and Chu Wanning turned back, modesty and shame and consideration be damned.

Chu Wanning had created a monstrosity.

On Mo Ran, the loose black t-shirt might have been spray-painted on him. The roughly cut armholes showed the perfect hills of his deltoids.

Mo Ran was looking up at him with a unfamiliar expression, mouth soft in a smile, eyes wide.

And on the table, two cut sleeves.

Oh, no.

Oh, no.

Chu Wanning snatched the sleeves up and shoved them deep into the pocket of his trousers. “I’m going upstairs!”

“Thank you for the vest!” Mo Ran shouted behind him as he thundered up to the relative privacy of the bedroom.

Not only had Mo Ran already had a spare t-shirt... Not only had Chu Wanning been so excruciatingly, stupidly obvious, destroying his own clothes to give to Mo Ran...

Not only did Mo Ran look even more ludicrously beautiful in it...

Chu Wanning threw himself onto the bed so that he could press his face into the pillow and moan in horror.

He had cut his sleeves for him.

Chapter 32: The Forbidden Topic

Mo Ran didn't stop beaming the whole time he was scrubbing the shower.

How was Chu Wanning so *cute*? How had Mo Ran never noticed it before?! Cutting the sleeves off his own t-shirt so that Mo Ran would have a spare, and then getting embarrassed that it had been unnecessary and trying to take it back – aiyo, it was adorable.

What was he planning to do with it? The idea of Chu Wanning wearing a muscle tank made him want to laugh until he cried; he'd probably only wear it over a white button-up shirt.

It reminded him of the spicy meal Mo Ran had brought that first day. He'd eaten it despite the tears and the red face and the coughing fit, marched off after Mo Ran had spat in it – that thought made him blush horribly, moving *swiftly* on – and then turned to thank him in that high-pitched voice that he only ever used when he was most embarrassed.

Ahh, why was he embarrassed of his kindness?

He washed his hands, and gave the shower a final rinse. It would do.

He *had* been blind. Chu Wanning did everything with the social grace of a hissing cat – insults and snapping and storming around – but the things he was *doing* were acts of kindness.

That girl Luo Xianxian had seen it. "*He's the kindest professor in the university. I used to be scared of him, then realised he was just awkward. He's so sweet."*

Whereas Shi Mei… Mo Ran was able to think about him now, occasionally, without going insane with rage. Shi Mei had certainly never cut up one of his t-shirts for him. He'd often said that he was available if ever Mo Ran needed help with something, but when it actually came down to it, he was always busy, or he'd said that it was something Chu Wanning was

more knowledgeable about. He was always so sweet, his manner so gentle, his smile so lovely, but what had he actually… done?

Other than sexually assault the man who trusted him, and then lie about it.

Mo Ran felt the knife of guilt twist in his gut.

He went upstairs. “Shower and toilet are clean! You hungry?”

“Nn.” Chu Wanning was sitting cross-legged on the bed; he had his tablet out, navigating something with his left hand, writing notes on a piece of paper with his right.

“What’s that?”

“My landslide report. I was going to go and take a look at the slide in daylight, but I’d rather preserve the battery on this and take notes by hand, save the battery for photographs.” He glanced up at Mo Ran. “Do you want to come?”

As if he was going to let Chu Wanning go alone. The man was a disaster magnet. “Sure. But, um. Why?”

“It’ll be the perfect case study for my geotechnical engineering lectures. It covers so much – soil mechanics, slope stability analysis, vertical, horizontal, and moment force equilibrium – and all the applications. And because we have no radar technology here, barely any internet, we’re going to do all the calculations by hand.” He looked excited at the thought. “It’ll make a perfect mid-term project. I need all the photographs we can get.”

Mo Ran was soon wishing he’d insisted they eat first. Chu Wanning’s analysis of the site was exhaustive. Several of the older men from the village were also stood in the tunnel, hands behind their backs as they chatted in a mixture of Nuosu and Sichuanese. Their eyes followed Chu Wanning as he made page after page of calculations in his head, working out the volume

of soil, the weight of the debris, the possibility of clearing one half first for emergency vehicles, how the other half would be contained and scaffolded…

It was incredible to watch him work. His single-minded focus on the problem, his messy ponytail swinging back and forth as he nodded to himself. Sometimes he'd get down on the ground, using his forearm or hand span as makeshift rulers. Usually Chu Wanning was so rigid, his whole body somehow tight, but right now he swayed, moving like a willow in the breeze, lost in his own world of numbers and equations.

But the villagers didn't like it. Mo Ran didn't know any Nuosu, and Sichuanese wasn't his native tongue, but he knew people, he knew their tones of voice and their body language, and he knew that with every minute Chu Wanning stood scribbling away in his new clothes, the more arrogant and interfering they thought him.

And odd, Mo Ran thought as he watched Chu Wanning rhythmically shift his weight from one foot to the other, outlandishly long hair swaying with him, occasionally murmuring one equation or another. Weird.

Abnormal.

"Fussy, sensitive, bad-tempered. And abnormal."

"Right," Chu Wanning said, coming back down. "Now for the outside. We've got to be careful not to trigger anything, but we need to climb up and over to see the other side. Good afternoon," he said as an aside, nodding to the villagers.

The old men grumbled in reply.

Chu Wanning moved with less than his usual grace, but what he lacked in coordination, he made up for in enthusiasm. His breathing was catching by the time they'd climbed up to survey the slope base, but he managed to gather enough to quiz Mo Ran.

“What method would you use to assess the stability here?”

“Sarma?” Sarma was always the best bet.

“Why? What advantage does it have over, say, Janbu’s?”

“Sarma takes moment balance into account, Janbu’s doesn’t.”

“Janbu’s *simplified* doesn’t. What about Janbu’s generalised?”

Mo Ran tried to remember his notes, happily abandoned immediately after his final exam. “Um…”

“Janbu’s simplified method’s assumption is that the resultant interslice forces are horizontal and an empirical correction factor is used to account for interslice shear forces. Janbu’s *generalised* method uses an assumed line of thrust to define the location of the interslice normal force,” Chu Wanning said, as he stepped into a dip in the soil and pitched forward.

Mo Ran caught him around the waist, pulling him back to the more even ground. Chu Wanning’s back was pressed to him, the words shocked from him and the breath knocked out of him.

He wrapped his other arm around Chu Wanning’s chest.

His skin smelt clean and fresh, and his hair smelt like flowers. Mo Ran was so close he could see the individual strands, each one shining like obsidian.

Mo Ran looked down, and behind Chu Wanning’s ear, he saw a tiny birth mark.

“You… you can let go of me now.”

“You’re all right?” Mo Ran said. His voice was low and heavy. He could feel Chu Wanning’s buttocks pressed against him, and it took all of his strength not to tighten his grip and grind against them.

“Be nice for me,” he wanted to say. *“Say thank you. Be a good boy.”*

Then he felt Chu Wanning shudder, and cold sense rolled over him as quickly and as devastatingly as any landslide.

He let go and stepped back. “Are you okay? You- you have to be careful.”

Chu Wanning didn’t look back at him. His back was rigid, and his jaw was tight. “Mn.”

“Sorry for grabbing at you.”

Chu Wanning waved his hand. “… do you need help going down?”

Mo Ran blinked in confusion. He wasn’t the one who had just stumbled, he wasn’t the one who’d only been out of a recovery clinic for twenty-four hours, and he wasn’t the one with a recent scapulectomy under his belt.

Then he realised.

“Yeah, the soil keeps shifting,” he said, reaching out his hand; Chu Wanning took it immediately. “Between us we should be able to balance it better – that’s so much easier, thank you.”

“Mn.” From his heightened position, Mo Ran could see the pinkness of Chu Wanning’s ears even more clearly. He wanted to wriggle with how cute he was. He helped Chu Wanning down the slope, pretending that it was Chu Wanning who was keeping him upright.

“Thanks,” he said, guiding Chu Wanning down onto the road again.

“It’s all right,” Chu Wanning replied softly. “Mm. Um, I’m going to take some photographs of this side.”

It was approaching dusk by the time he was satisfied, and Mo Ran was starving. “One more of you with it, and then let’s go back,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because I’m about to gnaw my own arm off.”

“No, I mean, why have a photo with me in it?”

“To show you were really here! It’ll add human interest, I promise. It’ll make the application of the physics more immediate.”

Chu Wanning looked doubtful, but he obediently stood in front of the landslide. He stood as straight as a soldier at attention and glared.

Mo Ran took a photograph. “Oooh kay… Just one more, but smiling!”

Chu Wanning blinked. His frown collapsed. “… why?”

“You look like you’re in it for scale! Human interest, remember? Honestly, smile. You’ll look better.”

Chu Wanning inhaled sharply. His shoulders shot up. He marched to Mo Ran and snatched his phone back.

“What? What did I say?”

"What do you mean by that?"

“Oh, you know. Little gift for the girls, reward anyone who's made it to the end of the lecture.”

His face fell. Too late, Mo Ran remembered the girl who was kicked out for the camera in the safety shower.

Chu Wanning’s eyes were fixed on the road. He had crossed his arms across his chest, gripping his own upper arms.

“Mo Ran. I can take a joke as well as the next man-”

Mo Ran couldn't help it; he laughed.

Chu Wanning’s eyes jerked up to his, and to Mo Ran’s stunned horror, there was genuine hurt in them.

“*I can take a joke as well as the next man*.” Chu Wanning swallowed and looked down again. “But comments about my appearance... They are not funny. They are cruel. And you are not cruel.”

For all that the road was solid, Mo Ran still felt as though the ground was shifting under his feet. “Shit. Shizun, I’m- I’m sorry. I only meant-”

Chu Wanning held up his hand to silence him. “I know. As I said, you are not cruel. I know as well that it’s unbecoming to be so sensitive about it. Especially for a man. But I... I know what I look like. And I... so. Please.”

Too late, too late, Mo Ran remembered the video of the assault - Shi Mei’s outstretched hands, saying something in entreaty. What had it been? *“You're so beautiful, I couldn’t help myself?”* How easy it was to imagine it – or remember the words in his own mouth. Or all those sexual threats in the hatemail letters...

And even more mundanely, it couldn’t have been easy at CNSA, so young and so brilliant and so aethereally attractive. Envy and anger from the other men, so much attention from the women. Chu Wanning young and traumatised, gaining a wider reputation for being stuck-up and arrogant with every flustered refusal he made. Mo Ran had once imagined Chu Wanning had fucked his way through the agency – that’s what he would have done, after all - but he knew the man better now. Maybe one or two steady girlfriends who vanished as soon as his star began to fall.

Maybe no one at all, focused as he was on his work, disillusioned by the dramatic end of his supervisor’s marriage...

He watched Chu Wanning begin to attempt the climb back over the landslide, and ran to catch up. The reason didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that Chu Wanning was sensitive about his looks, so Mo Ran wouldn’t mention them again.

“Could you give me a hand up?” he asked, and waited for Chu Wanning to take his hand for balance.

He would have been such a dickhead about this last year. *Oh, poor Chu Wanning, so beautiful it’s inconvenient*. Probably with a few long looks at his arse to reassure himself that, yes, Chu Wanning was fucking hot. He’d have indulged in long fantasies about knocking him down a peg or two, ruining those good looks until Chu Wanning was sweaty and disgusting and fucked out. No longer the Perfect Sexless Savant, too good for the likes of Mo Ran.

But Chu Wanning had shown him something hidden and vulnerable, and all Mo Ran wanted to do now was to protect it.

They'd missed lunch, so they went straight to the village's restaurant for dinner. The place was full, and loud with discussion. The village head was arguing with some of the older men in a mixture of Nuosu and Sichuanese.

Mo Ran knew none of the former, but plenty of the latter. "They don't want to wait for the digger from Chengdu," he murmured. "They want to start digging tomorrow."

Chu Wanning frowned. "But it's not safe."

"Not safe *not* to either. We're completely cut off from both the hospital in Ya'an and the clinic in Wuchang."

"Still. There's far more risk of injuries if digging by hand begins."

"It'll be all right. They're old hands at this."

Chu Wanning fiddled with the plastic covering on the table, cracked and lifting at one corner. "Hm."

Mo Ran looked down at Chu Wanning. "You want to help?"

Chu Wanning darted a glare at him. "I'm not a specialist in geo-technical engineering."

"You literally wrote the book on it." Mo Ran grinned at him, and popped a piece of tofu in his mouth. "It's just because you're a specialist in so many areas now that you've come back round to being unspecialised again."

Chu Wanning swatted at him, but there was none of the pain that his earlier teasing had evoked. “Perhaps if they have some geotextiles…”

By the time they’d finished eating, a conclusion had clearly been reached. Chu Wanning went to the village head to try to persuade him to wait for the diggers, or to call for a smaller one from Wuchang, but evidently realised it was a lost battle.

“I’m going to go to bed,” he said to Mo Ran, after bidding the village head goodnight. “I don’t know why I’m so tired…”

“I do,” Mo Ran said, and nudged him. “I might stay here for a while and have another drink.”

He saw the relief on Chu Wanning’s face; he had known that he would find the constant presence of another person difficult. Chu Wanning needed solitude to recharge his batteries. “Only as long as you don’t stagger in drunk.”

“I promise, wifey,” Mo Ran said, and laughed at Chu Wanning’s outraged look. “No, no, honestly, on my honour. I’ll just give you some time to shower, then I’ll come back and help you with the dressings again.”

Chu Wanning glared at him, glancing over his shoulder at the table of college students. “It’s fine. I’ll be fine. Enjoy your evening.”

Mo Ran bought himself another beer, and wasn’t surprised when the college students budged up and made a space for him. Introductions were made, and thankfully none of them were at Sisheng. That made things simpler at least.

They seemed nice enough, but boring, after Chu Wanning’s company. One pretty, well-endowed girl called Ling’er kept pressing her knee to his and laughing at everything he said. As the guest, they bought a drink for him, and then he returned the favour.

“So, what’s his deal?” one of the boy’s slurred. “Is he a grad student?”

“Finished, actually. He’s got a doctorate,” Mo Ran said delicately.

“Din’ he want a drink?”

“Nah, he’s been working all day. I’ve just been hanging around getting underfoot.”

“Saw him saying not to dig.”

“He’s an engineer,” Mo Ran said genially to the drunk boy. “He knows what he’s on about.”

“I bet he’s very clever,” Ling’er said, taking on the role of mediator. “He seems it. You both do. Are you an engineer too, Mo Ran?”

“En. Just finished my Master’s.”

“Oh, *wow*. What are you going to do now?” She leant towards him, and her breast pressed against his arm.

“Ah, dunno. I’m a waster,” Mo Ran said hurriedly and stood up. “Thanks, guys. Maybe see you tomorrow, yeah?”

“Sure,” said Ling’er. “See you tomorrow.”

Chapter 33: Those Three Words

Chapter Notes

> Oh my God, twelve days since the last update, I'm so sorry! I have been really overwhelmed and very down; I've now made a medication change, but I always feel like I have the flu for a few days whenever I change my dose, so I've just not been able to get into the right frame-of-mind to finish this one. Thank you so much for your patience! ♥

Chu Wanning is dreaming.

It is a bad dream. He is wandering the wards of a hospital. The corridors are empty, but he knows that someone is following him. Someone is watching from the shadows, and Chu Wanning is desperate to see their face, because only then will he know whether he wants to be caught or not.

He turns another corner, and there they stand. But he doesn’t recognise them. He steps closer, but their face refuses to solidify into that of someone he knows. He just sees black, hungry eyes.

Then there is a noise, and the dream changes.

He is in the guesthouse in Yuliang. The window is open and curtainless. The rain has stopped, and now the room is filled with moonlight.

Mo Ran is climbing the stairs, and Chu Wanning relaxes.

It is now a good dream. He doesn’t have many of them.

“You awake?” Mo Ran asks, and Chu Wanning mumbles in return, in that vague non-vocal language of dreams. So much more forgiving than the waking world, with its verbal demands. “They were all right. Boring, though. Thought I’d rather come back here…”

“Boring…”

“Are you asleep?” Mo Ran asks, and he’s smiling. Chu Wanning can’t see it, but perhaps he can hear it. He *feels* it, somehow. “What about your Cica-care sheets?”

Chu Wanning groans and rolls over. Even his subconscious isn’t free of the blasted things.

But Mo Ran laughs. “I’ll do them now – oh, good, they’re dry. Lie like that, Wanning…”

Wanning. It’s definitely a dream, then. Mo Ran only ever calls him *Wanning* in his dreams.

The medication he took before bed smooths the pain into something heavy and warm, weighing him down in sleep, anchoring him in roborative unconsciousness, lest every twist of discomfort or tug of skin on his back wake him up again. Mo Ran is applying the sheets to his back, pulling them up to keep the skin tight, and Chu Wanning can feel it, at a distance. It’s that phenomenon in dreams where one knows that something *is* happening, and so can feel it happening.

Usually, being so aware that he is dreaming would bring with it the flash of lucidity, one that he would use to drag himself up with a gasp to the waking world. But now he doesn’t. He lets himself relax in this dream for a little longer. A dream where Mo Ran isn’t disgusted by the sight of his back, and instead applies his dressings with tender fingers.

“There you go. All done,” Mo Ran says, and Chu Wanning regrets the end of it. His body is too heavy to turn over again, and he has grown used to lying on his front by now.

In his dream, he feels Mo Ran gently stroke his hair back from his face, and that’s what cracks his heart open. He used to long for someone to stroke his hair. In the orphanage he had

stroked his own, rocking in his corner, pretending that someone else was smoothing it for him.

He wishes he could stay in this dream forever.

*

Mo Ran had left Chu Wanning sleeping. He couldn't believe that two mornings in a row he had been able to wake up next to him.

All the habitual tension and coldness in his face was gone, replaced with soft pinkness, long lashes thick and black against his cheeks. But he wasn't just beautiful. There was something painful about the sight as well. He curled up on the bed like a cat, but when Mo Ran had come in the night before he had been tight instead, huddled on himself, as though in his dream he'd been trying to make himself as small as possible.

Mo Ran left a note, saying that there were fresh doughsticks under the cover on the table, that he was going to be digging for most of the day, but he'd text at lunchtime and be back for dinner.

The male college students were already there, along with some of the younger elders, carrying large plastic sacks to hold the earth.

"Your friend not with you?" an older man with a beard asked.

"He's busy with other things," Mo Ran said, selecting a shovel.

"Yeah. Very busy yesterday."

Mo Ran realised that he was one of the men who'd watched Chu Wanning at work the day before. "He was. He works so hard. Not a slacker like me."

The man looked pointedly at the shovel in Mo Ran's hands and got to work.

Mo Ran had *hoped* that Chu Wanning might have paid attention to his exhortation to relax and rest, but he wasn't surprised when at ten o'clock Chu Wanning came running down the tunnel, visibly out of practice and out of breath, hair coming down out of a messy ponytail.

He was wearing a t-shirt that Mo Ran hadn't seen before: royal blue, emblazoned with 'Shanghai International Recovery Clinic'. Chu Wanning's dislike of wearing dirty clothes must have won out over his preference for privacy.

He saw Chu Wanning stop and sigh for some reason, when he saw him. Mo Ran waved. Chu Wanning shook his head, and then he turned back.

He went for the pile of spades.

"One sec," Mo Ran said to the other men, and sprinted. "*Oi!*"

Chu Wanning straightened up, holding a spade; the weight of it clearly surprised him and sent a twinge of pain across his face, but he covered it quickly. "Don't *oi* me."

Mo Ran easily pulled Chu Wanning's spade from his grip with one hand and threw it back onto the pile. "No."

Chu Wanning was staring at his chest, but something in Mo Ran's voice made him raise his chin and meet his eyes. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"I mean if you think I'm going to let you dig then you're an idiot." Mo Ran was surprised by how stern his voice was.

“*Let* me?” Chu Wanning was staring up at him; he didn’t have a problem with eye contact when he was furious.

“Let you. I’ve seen your back, and I *know* you shouldn’t even be here yet. My uncle was talking about a year, and you’re out after five months, so no, I’m not going to let you tear open your shoulder again because of your damn pride.”

A blush of fury was creeping up the sides of Chu Wanning’s neck. “I think I know my own limitations better than you, Mo Ran.”

“Maybe. I don’t care. It’s not happening.”

Chu Wanning ignored him and reached out to pick up the spade again; Mo Ran grabbed his arm and pulled it back.

“Hey!”

Mo Ran’s fingers encircled Chu Wanning’s wrist easily. Mo Ran could have snapped it like a twig if he wanted to.

The stupid man. The stupid, stubborn, proud, idiot man. He couldn’t bear to lose face in front of a few old men he’d never see again, and for *that* he’d destroy his own shoulder? For *that* he’d risk tearing whatever the doctors had managed to do to anchor a new scapula into him? For that he’d rip open the skin that made Mo Ran’s throat tight with grief and guilt?

He was genuinely and sincerely *angry*. Chu Wanning might not care about his health or well-being, but Mo Ran did. “I’ll tie you to the bed if I have to, but you’re not picking up a shovel.”

Chu Wanning inhaled sharply and tried to yank his wrist free. Mo Ran squeezed it.

“Mo Ran!”

“I told you. It’s not happening.”

Chu Wanning’s ears were bright red; he was so furious that his mouth was slightly open.

Mo Ran grinned. He could bare his teeth too.

“So. You can not dig, go back to the village, fetch bottles of water, whatever. Or you can not dig, and they’ll all see me carrying you over my shoulder.”

“You-!”

“Those are the two choices, Shizun,” Mo Ran said. Something dark had taken over him, something that reared its head and sniffed blood, something that was horribly, *horribly* interested in the idea of carrying Chu Wanning to a bed and lashing him to it. “You’re not digging either way. Make the decision, or I’ll assume you want the latter.”

Chu Wanning gasped, and Mo Ran felt his cock twitch.

He longed for Chu Wanning to continue to be stubborn, because the excuse to manhandle him was right there, in his grasp, and he knew that he could bury his teeth in Chu Wanning’s throat and shove him down and-

And he let go and stepped back. What was he doing? What was he *thinking*?!

Chu Wanning’s hand convulsed, and for a second Mo Ran honestly thought he was going to punch him. Then he stalked away, power-walking with such vigour that his ponytail came loose, darkness cascading down his back to his buttocks-

Stop! *Stop.* Mo Ran spun around, thanking any deity that might exist that the tunnel was so long and dark at the buried end, so that the village men didn't see how hard he was.

At least he could dig. He threw himself at the rocks and soil as though they had personally harmed him, as though they had sent the bomb, as though they were Shi Mei. Dig it up, shovel it into the farm sacks, haul the sacks to the side.

He dug until his breath was burning in his lungs and his muscles felt like he'd been beaten. They'd begun to draw a crowd – *Mo Ran* had begun to draw a crowd. It was sweltering inside the tunnel by now, and the condensation of their breath rained down on them.

"Hey, hey, lunch time," one of the older men said. He gestured to the piles of bags behind them. "Then we'll empty them. We've run out of bags."

Mo Ran sucked down a hard, hot breath. He nodded and pulled off his vest – Chu Wanning's erstwhile t-shirt – and used it to mop the sweat off his face as they walked out into the sunshine.

He shuttered his eyes, blinded by the light. He reached up to shade them and opened them again, just in time to see Chu Wanning.

He was among a group of women, some bringing lunch boxes and bottles and flasks of tea. He was pulling a cart behind him. Mo Ran noticed that he was holding the grip with his right hand.

He stared back at Mo Ran. His mouth was tightly shut, but his eyes were huge.

"This clever young man fixed your cart, Yuan Wei! He said that you'd need it to carry all the soil out of the tunnel!"

"We'd just realised!" the man apparently called Yuan Wei said. "We've run out of bags to fill!"

“If this young man doesn’t want to get dirty digging, maybe he can at least bring the soil back and forth?” said the bearded man. “Then he can empty it. Or someone else, if that would be too much hard work.”

Chu Wanning was white. His lips had disappeared. He dropped the cart handle with a thud and drew a breath, but Mo Ran got in before him.

“And how long had that cart gone unfixed? How long would it take us to haul the soil out bag by bag? He’ll be able to do in minutes what would have taken us hours. That’s why I helped by digging, and he helped by fixing. I know where my strengths are.”

The man wasn’t impressed. “And you can tell where his strengths aren’t.”

Mo Ran laughed. It was a loud, obnoxious sound, amused and contemptuous. “The same could be said for yourself.” He tapped the side of his head.

“Hey, hey, hey, now, now,” one of the women said – the owner of the guesthouse. “You’re all just hot and tired, eh? Sit down, have a drink, have some food. We’re all working together.”

The women came forward; Chu Wanning hung back with the cart. The bearded man went to receive his lunch from his wife, and received a loud berating instead. Mo Ran grinned and went to Chu Wanning; he stepped back, a cold sneer on his face.

“Put your shirt on. You’re a disgrace.”

“Ah, sorry…” It didn’t feel particularly pleasant, pulling a soaked vest tightly over soaked skin, but Chu Wanning kept staring in horrified outrage at his chest. “Do you want some lunch…?”

“Not with you,” Chu Wanning hissed.

“What, you’d rather eat with your new friend over there?”

“Shut up!” Chu Wanning’s voice was low. “Don’t- How *dare you*-?”

“How dare I… what?”

“I can speak for myself,” Chu Wanning said. Mo Ran suddenly noticed that the corners of his eyes were red with fury. “Can you hear me grunting, hmm? Making animal noises? No? Then I can speak for myself!”

Oh. Shit. “I know you can,” Mo Ran said. “I wasn’t… I didn’t think you *couldn’t* speak. I thought that you shouldn’t have to.”

I just want to go somewhere where people don’t hate me.

“You don’t… stand up for yourself,” Mo Ran said. “What were you going to say, to defend yourself?”

“I was going to tell him to mind his own damn business,” Chu Wanning said.

I don’t know how to stop making people hate me.

“But it’s not just *that one guy*,” Mo Ran said. “He’s a fucking asshole. Fuck him. But everyone else is listening, and if you weren’t going to defend yourself then I was going to. You don’t deserve to have people think shit about you, so why do you…? Why don’t you defend yourself?”

“What’s the point of it? They’ve made up their minds about me already. What is defending myself going to do other than make me look even more pathetic?”

Mo Ran felt helpless. “People can change their minds…”

I changed my mind about you.

“They rarely do.”

“But they do sometimes. People can get the wrong impression. Interpret something badly. People can change…”

I can change. I have changed.

He *had* changed. And he wasn’t the Mo Ran who thought only about himself anymore; he was now the Mo Ran that could see though Chu Wanning’s shields of coldness and anger to his vulnerability, his loneliness and his hurt.

He took Chu Wanning’s hand, his back to the villagers. “So let me change their minds. You won’t look pathetic because someone else is defending you. Rely on me for this.”

Chu Wanning had frozen. His mouth was a rictus of confusion; he looked as though he was in pain.

Mo Ran stroked the back of his hand with his thumb. “Let me help.”

He wanted to rub all the anger and defensiveness out of his body, until he was the soft and pliant Chu Wanning he’d left in the bed that morning. This was the pain that had driven Chu Wanning to the roof of the hospital, and it was Mo Ran who had pulled him back from the ledge, so it was Mo Ran who had to ameliorate that pain now.

“I was a shit earlier. I just couldn’t bear to see you in more pain, but I should have found some other solution. The cart is a genius idea. I’ll dig, you tow, and someone can be unloading it at the other end. That’ll show that dickhead.”

“It’ll look like it was only when he called me lazy,” Chu Wanning said through gritted teeth. He’d broken eye contact, and was staring at their joined hands.

“I’ll put them right.”

Chapter 34: The Epiphany

Chapter Notes

> Thank you, Ling'er, for your 'female character in a slash fic' service. 🫡 You deserve better, but Mo Ran is the wrong place to look for that, and this fic is already going to be waaaay longer than I'd planned!

Being blown up had been painful. Having five long nails bury themselves in his scapula had been painful. The hot air of the encroaching fire had been painful. Hauling Mo Ran onto the raw bloody flesh of his back had been painful. The smoke in his lungs had been painful. The shards of glass and splinters of hot metal burying themselves in his legs and arms and chest had been painful. Every inch through the flaming hellscape had been painful. Knowing that every second he lingered was another second closer to the next inevitable explosion. Breaking out into the sunlight and collapsing, Mo Ran a dead weight, unconscious and injured by Chu Wanning's complacency…

That had been painful.

Waking up in the hospital had been painful. The guilt lodged in his throat had been painful. The cold resolution to protect the Xues from further danger by killing himself had been painful. Mo Ran's open, innocent gaze had been painful. The silent climb up the steps of the fire exit, useless left arm dangling and pulling open his destroyed shoulder had been painful. The beating of his heart against his final lungful of cold air had been painful.

The quiet search for a lonely place to die had been painful.

Right now, lulled by the last five months, memories softened by routine and care, Chu Wanning was inclined to think that the past week in Yuliang had been the most painful of them all.

He had always been particularly chaste, even as a teenager; by the time he entered puberty, he was already beginning his doctorate. He knew the mechanics of sex from textbooks, and it all

seemed rather messy and distasteful. Repulsive, even. Everyone seemed to be absolutely mad about it, and for the life of him, Chu Wanning couldn't think why.

He did *try*. He tried to put aside his shame and embarrassment and fantasised about women, hands behind his head. Nothing. He looked around in his lectures, surreptitiously glancing at the women he objectively knew were considered to be most attractive, but his gaze only lingered on some of the tall male students, coming in late after a sports practice, arms bare…

The thought that he might be… one of *those* was worse than feeling that he was missing some fundamental human element. He put all thoughts of sex firmly behind him, and attended to his studies with renewed vigour.

For more than fifteen years, it had worked. Until now.

And it was all Mo Ran's fault.

No. Chu Wanning turned over in the bed, staring out of the curtainless window. It was *his* fault. He wasn't going to be one of those barking beasts of a professor, lusting over his students and then making some ridiculous obscene excuse for himself.

They were in Sichuan. It was nearly August. There was no air conditioning. It was well over 30° every day, and the humidity was nigh unbearable. Mo Ran was doing hard manual labour in the stuffiness of a blocked tunnel.

It was perfectly logical that he would dig shirtless.

It was completely innocent.

And if Chu Wanning couldn't drag his gaze away from the sweat that ran between the tightly defined muscles of his back…

From the smear of dirt across his abdominal muscles…

From the dark curl of hair that was plastered to his neck…

That was Chu Wanning's fault.

And if right now Mo Ran was lying an inch away from him, on the same bed, radiating heat and snoring ever so softly…

He'd never truly understood the poetry of Li Shangyin before, but he did now. One inch of love was an inch of ashes. Chu Wanning felt as though he was on fire, and he had the experience by which he was able to compare it *extremely* accurately.

He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists. Five days in Yuliang had been more emotionally devastating than five months of operations, physiotherapy, and police investigation. All of his self-discipline was irreparably shattered; he had less control over himself than he had when he was thirteen.

He had not touched himself. That felt like the final boundary; that really was too far. Thoughts were bad enough, but the translation of those thoughts into action was unforgivable.

He reached down, but only to dig his fingernails into his thigh. They had fallen into a kind of routine in Yuliang, Mo Ran digging and Chu Wanning pulling the cart behind him, ferrying the full sacks of soil out of the tunnel to be emptied. In the evenings they ate in the restaurant. Mo Ran must have told them that he was a mechanical engineer, because the villagers had begun to bring things for him to fix. There'd even been a Night Guardian. If he didn't have the parts, he dutifully made a note of what was needed and promised to send them on from Wuchang. All the while Mo Ran drank and laughed with the college students who flocked around him, though he always remained sitting at their table, and let them come to him.

It comforted him more than he could admit even to himself. If Mo Ran had instead got up to go to the students' table, Chu Wanning knew he would have stalked out in high offence. *Gnothi seauton*, as the Greeks said.

But Mo Ran stayed by his side, and so Chu Wanning could endure it.

They never stayed long. They were too exhausted. For Mo Ran the awkwardness of sharing a bed with his professor seemed to have entirely worn off; he changed Chu Wanning's dressings while keeping up a comforting stream of gossip, sharing what he'd learnt about each of the villagers, while Chu Wanning nodded along.

Chu Wanning was still on a hefty dose of painkillers, and usually fell asleep first. But dreams woke him up, night after night. The bad dreams were dreams of Huaizui, of the bomb, of the hospital.

But the worst dreams were the ones of Mo Ran. Mo Ran's chest, Mo Ran's body, Mo Ran's eyes and sharp grin. Mo Ran's scent and Mo Ran's heat.

Mo Ran carrying him in front of the shocked villagers of Yuliang, Chu Wanning uselessly beating his fists on his back. Mo Ran throwing him down on the bed, pinning him with his weight, lashing his wrists to the bedposts until he couldn't move.

Mo Ran's low voice in his ear, growling, *"I warned you, Wanning…"*

Digging his fingers into his thigh wasn't working any more. Instead, he reached across his chest and gripped his left shoulder.

That did it.

The red blast of pain felt cleansing. He squeezed until he felt as though he was about to pass out from the pain, and then relaxed. The pain dulled again, the scarlet deepening into crimson, into carmine, rosewood, wine, garnet, blood. Black.

*

When the first man was able to step out of the western end of the tunnel they all cheered. Mo Ran laughed in joy and hugged Chu Wanning, who squirmed like a cat. It gave them a new burst of energy, and the pride at having dug themselves out before the digger arrived made them excited to finish the job. They worked even after sunset, and then staggered back, delirious with exhaustion but thrilled, to a celebratory meal at the restaurant.

Mo Ran carried two bowls of rabbit-stewed rice over to the table. “I asked them for some non-spicy food, and Pan-daniang kept some back for us before they added the chilli.”

Chu Wanning took one of the bowls from him. Mo Ran didn’t think he’d ever get used to seeing him like this, in a rumpled t-shirt and a messy ponytail. The stark lines of his pale face looked so incongruous here. He looked as exhausted as Mo Ran felt, with deep shadows under his eyes, but he was wearing a small smile as well, and his gaze was somehow… soft. “Didn’t you want a hot dish for yourself?”

“Nah, I like this,” Mo Ran said.

“Mn.” Chu Wanning stirred the rice with his sticks, making his customary pre-prandial examination, looking for any pieces of gristle or unexpected ingredients or textures that could assault him. “I’ve noticed that when you are with the Xues, you like spicy food, but when you are with me, you like milder.”

A piece of rabbit-meat lodged in Mo Ran’s throat; he forced it down painfully. “What?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean… Hm,” Chu Wanning said, in that way he did when he was thinking about how to phrase something. “I suppose I’m wondering… If you were eating alone, without someone else to please, which would you prefer?”

Mo Ran blinked.

He would prefer… What would he prefer?

“I mean… probably spicy? I like mapo tofu, but I also like wonton soup… Um.” Why was it so hard, to think about what he actually *liked*? “Pancakes are okay. But I just… It’s all food, isn’t it? It’s all good. What’s important is who you’re eating it with.”

Chu Wanning was looking at him – really *looking*, like he did at a puzzle or an interesting machine. Something writhed inside of him, some strange but potent mixture of yearning and irritation. It made him sit up straight and plaster his face with a wide grin. “I’m just hungry!”

“Hm,” was all that Chu Wanning said to that. He returned daintily to his meal, but the conversation after that was stilted.

Chu Wanning was visibly lagging by the time they finished, but as Mo Ran prepared to return their bowls, Dang Wuhou came up to them. He was the bearded man who at the beginning of the week had suggested that Chu Wanning was too lazy or too precious to work.

He was carrying three quarters of a bottle of baijiu with him. And three glasses.

“Drink?”

“We were just going to-” Chu Wanning began, and Mo Ran loudly spoke over him.

“No, no, I’m not too bad, I’ll be fine for one drink – of course, Uncle, pull up a chair.”

Dang Wuhou poured out three measures of baijiu. “You’ll be on your way tomorrow.”

“I think it’ll take a few more hours first thing, but it’ll be so much quicker now that we can just shovel straight out westwards. But yeah, we’ll head about lunchtime. Important thing’s to get it cleared before that digger arrives, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, exactly,” Dang Wuhou said. He shot Mo Ran a grateful look, and then Chu Wanning a more reticent one. “Well. You’ve both been a lot of help.”

Chu Wanning raised an eyebrow at that. “Of course. Whatever we could do.”

“Ahh… That’s the thing.” Dang Wuhou looked uncomfortable. “Mo Ran was saying that you’re mechanics, and that there was a fire in your workshop. That you carried him out. That’s why you’ve got a bum shoulder.”

Chu Wanning glared at Mo Ran. “Did he, now?”

“Well. I didn’t know that. My wife, she always says I talk before I think.” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I made assumptions about you. ‘Cause of how you look. A man can’t help the face he’s born with.”

Chu Wanning’s jaw was tight; his ears were pink. “Well,” he said, and Mo Ran could hear the effort in his voice, “that’s kind of you to say, Mr. Dang. Thank you. Cheers.”

Dang Wuhou raised his glass with visible relief, and they all drank. Chu Wanning couldn’t handle spice, but he drank alcohol like a pro, even eye-wateringly strong village-brewed baijiu.

Mo Ran gave into the tickle in his throat and coughed, happy to sacrifice some face; as he’d predicted, Chu Wanning sharply slapped his back, and Dang Wuhou laughed.

“Child,” Chu Wanning said, shaking his head.

“It just took me by surprise; okay, okay, one more, let me save some face,” Mo Ran said, and Dang Wuhou happily obliged. “To Yuliang Village.”

They drank, and Dang Wuhou took the next toast, seeming far more at ease with his apology behind him. “To welcome guests.”

It was surprisingly gracious, and they drank to it thankfully. Then it was Chu Wanning’s turn. “To the excavation crew. May they not be too disappointed.”

Dang Wuhou laughed, and topped up their glasses again once they’d drunk. “I also realised I don’t actually know your name. Mo Ran always calls you ‘Shizun’.”

“My name is Chu Wanning.”

Mo Ran managed not to close his eyes and exhale, but he certainly did it inwardly. One day, Chu Wanning would sacrifice just the faintest sliver of his principles and his honesty for an easier life, but clearly it wasn’t going to be tonight.

“Huh,” Dang Wuhou said. “I know that name from somewhere.”

“There’s someone with the same name on television,” Mo Ran lied easily. He carried the conversation for a while, until it was polite for Dang Wuhou to get up and go back to his friends. Mo Ran sighed in relief, and grinned at Chu Wanning. “Well done. Nicely handled.”

“Oh, shut up,” Chu Wanning said, and stood up. “I’m going to bed.”

“I’ll be right behind you; I’ll just bring these plates back and say goodnight to Pan-daniang.”

“I can wait.”

“No, you take the shower,” Mo Ran said, and grinned when Chu Wanning abandoned all pretence of politeness and left.

He returned their bowls and glasses, saying goodnight to everyone; he knew pretty much every name now, and several of the children pestered him for his signature trick of lifting them up by the ankles and swinging them upside down. He finally managed to extricate himself after another fifteen minutes and escaped into the darkness.

He was nearly at the guesthouse when he heard running footsteps behind him. Adrenaline spiked in him, but just as he was about to spin around, swinging his fist, he heard a female voice-

“Mo Ran! Wait!”

He dropped his hand and managed to smile just in time. “Ling’er! You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, and caught her breath. “Yeah, I… Well. It’s your last night.”

“Yeah, yeah, but I’ll be around all morning, it’s still not safe to get a car through. We’ll probably head off around lunchtime, so I’ll see you then to say goodbye!”

“No, I…” She turned her head, looking up at the moon; its light fell across her face, highlighting her soft face and smooth skin. “I meant… As it’s your last night, you could come back to mine, if you wanted. For a drink.”

Oh. Shit.

“Ehh…” Mo Ran raked his hand through his hair. “I, I really ought to be getting back, I’m knackered-”

“Please,” Ling’er said. She took a step towards him. “Just one drink.”

Mo Ran stepped back. “Look, you’re a really nice girl – you’re very pretty, but I’m just not-”

“Not what? Not interested?” She sounded a little surprised by the idea. “I don’t do this normally, you know. I’m not- This isn’t what I’d normally-”

“Shit, no, no,” Mo Ran said. “I think it’s great. Honestly. It’s me. I’m just not… You know.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Are you…? Oh. Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“What?”

“You’re gay,” Ling’er said, and suddenly the remnants of the debris in the tunnel didn’t seem like too much of an obstacle, they could probably make a run for it. She must have seen the look on his face, because she rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to tell anyone, don’t look so… I just should have realised. The first time two good-looking men come through Yuliang, of course they’d be gay.”

“I- I mean, I am, but he’s not-“

“Please. God, I’ve been so stupid. Of course. You’re in love with Chu Wanning.”

Mo Ran opened and closed his mouth, looking very much like a fish out of water. “I’m-?! Wait, you *know who*-?!”

“Of course I know – come on, look at him! How often do you see a man who looks like that in real life?”

“But- but the elders- the Party Secretary-”

“He knows, but the rest don’t. He’s keeping it quiet. When his daughter was pregnant there was a gas leak in their house, and a Night Guardian saved her life. He can’t say it publicly,

obviously, but he's a supporter." Ling'er looked at him. "Fuck. Mo Ran. There's no need to look so worried. I'm not going to tell anyone. I don't think they'd care, having got to know you both, but I'm not some shrieking jealous bitch who's going to throw him under the bus because you rejected me."

"No, no, I- I know. But. Thank you."

The light was dim, but he could just about see her roll her eyes. "Anyway. You're gone tomorrow. I've had a few drinks, wanted the party to continue. Whatever."

"Yeah. Yeah, just… But," Mo Ran said, tripping over his words; his mind was racing, and sweat prickled in his head. "But I'm not in love with Chu Wanning. We're just friends. I was just picking him up from the train station."

"Sure you were. Of course you would. Because you're in love with him."

"What- That doesn't even make any sense! What would even make you think that?"

"Er, the way you look at him, the way you talk about him, the way you trail after him, fetching his drinks and food and practically feeding him." She shook her head. "I'm going back. Goodnight, Mo Ran."

He watched her walk away. Her words echoed in his ears.

In love with Chu Wanning.

In *love* with Chu Wanning!

It made no sense. Yes, he'd thought that Chu Wanning was hot from the moment he saw him. Thought that he was more than that. That he was beautiful. He'd fantasised, and he had to

admit, he had to keep a tight rein on his lust. Especially sleeping as they were, in the same bed…

But that was lust. That wasn't love. Chu Wanning was…

What did *in love* even mean? He'd been *in love* with Shi Mei, and look at what had happened there. Shi Mei had treated him kindly, and Chu Wanning had treated him harshly, and so he'd been in love with Shi Mei, and Chu Wanning was just… something unattainable. Being in love was a consequence of being treated kindly.

Was that it? When he discovered that it had actually been Chu Wanning who treated him better, he had just unconsciously directed his affection from Shi Mei to him?

Mo Ran stood in the middle of the empty road. He had to *think*, and it made him want to tear his hair out.

Then Chu Wanning's own words came back to him.

If you were eating alone, without someone else to please, which would you prefer?

At dinner he'd barely understood the question. Food was food, and when it was scarce, preference was a luxury he hadn't been able to afford.

The same was true of affection.

Was he truly that pathetic?

Was what he thought had been love really just been loneliness?

Shi Mei had given him a few smiles and a few soft words, and that was enough for Mo Ran to think he was in love with him?

And at the same time… At the same time. He'd been *obsessed* with Chu Wanning. With proving him wrong. Making him proud. Obsessed with the lines of his face and the shape of his body and the scent of his hair.

And it had never been enough. He'd gritted his teeth and learnt Engineering just to take class after class with Chu Wanning. And that *still* hadn't been enough, so he'd done a Master's as well. Just to be near Chu Wanning. Just for the chance of a glance in his direction.

How could he have been so *fucking stupid?*

When Shi Mei had told him that Chu Wanning had kissed him, he had been so furious. So outraged. And yes, the upper layer of that outrage had truly been that Shi Mei – sweet, kind, gentle Shi Mei – could have been so assaulted.

But beneath that… was the anger that it had been *Chu Wanning*. The one person whom Mo Ran had genuinely and sincerely thought would *never* do such a thing.

And under that.

Under that, there was something blind and *raging*. It had made him park his car on this very same stretch of mountain road and punch the wheel and *scream*.

The idea that Chu Wanning had kissed Shi Mei. Had chosen him.

He hadn't realised. He hadn't *known.* He wanted to plead to the sky and tell it that he *hadn't known*. Why had his first thought been to seduce Chu Wanning? Why had such an idiotic plan seemed so brilliant to him? The first suggestion of an excuse, and Mo Ran had seized it in his teeth.

And then Chu Wanning had been… human. He'd been funny and shy and silly. He'd coughed and cried over the spicy food and tried to eat it anyway and then thanked Mo Ran for it. He'd drunk every morning out of a gaudy gold mug because Mo Ran had bought it for him.

He'd told him about music and poetry and fencing, phoenix eyes alight with joy and excitement. He'd moved with such elegance and strength through his tai chi forms, made shining and aethereal by the reflection of dawnlight off the snow.

He'd been so quietly stoic as he showed Mo Ran how to catalogue his hatemail. He'd been so ruthless and so fast in that alleyway fight, and then so worried and so sweet in Mo Ran's arms after he thought he'd been stabbed.

He'd read fantasy books, stories of brave heroes saving lives and righting injustices, and had been embarrassed that Mo Ran found it out.

He'd told Mo Ran the secrets of his past.

And even without those things… His desire had already been there. He'd already longed for Chu Wanning. Now he loved him as well.

He loved him.

He felt horrified. He felt as though his skull had been split in half; he hadn't felt like this since he'd woken up in the hospital. How couldn't he have known? How could he have been so stupid? He was overwhelmed by this new understanding, and couldn't comprehend how the mountains around him weren't collapsing, the ground beneath him not splitting, the sky above not tearing itself to shreds.

He was in love with Chu Wanning.

He was so, so *fucked*.

Chapter 35: The Insect of Greatest Virtue

Chapter Notes

> A few months ago, I said that this fic was turning into a behemoth. It might end up being 100k. I was going to write a slooow burn, I chuckled hubristically to myself.
>
> *laughing, screaming, writhing, wailing*
>
> As we pass the 100k line I just wanted to say thank you, thank you, THANK YOU to all of you for reading and commenting. Whether you have just caught up (welcome!) or whether you've been here from the start (special love and adoration for you!! ❤️), you have no idea how motivating your comments are and how much joy they give me. Thank you so much!

Chu Wanning removed and washed his silicone scar-sheets and left them on his t-shirt to dry. He could not wait, he thought as he stepped into the shower, to have a proper bath again. The guesthouse had running water, which had been by no means a given, but it was freezing cold. In the Sichuan heat – and it was Dashu now, the hottest time of the year – it was welcome, but he hated to think what it would be like in the winter.

But a long soak in a piping hot bath, air conditioning, a washing machine… He dried off, using one of his t-shirts as a towel, and dressed for bed.

He didn't like to wait for Mo Ran with his shirt off. It felt… presumptuous. But he *had* expected Mo Ran to be back by now. It was over half an hour since he'd left the restaurant.

Mo Ran would be along in a minute. He had probably got caught in conversation with someone. He likely had a queue of children wanting to be tossed in the air before he left.

But then an hour had passed, and then another half. Chu Wanning stared at his phone in his hand, but he refused to call, to ask "*Where are you?!*" like some nagging wife who was being cheated on. Mo Ran was a grown man. It wasn't-

He thought of the men in the alleyway.

But the likelihood of any kind of *danger*, here-

Or another landslide…

As his pride wrestled with his anxiety, he stretched around to put on the sheets himself. He couldn't get a decent tension with them, but they'd protect his skin somewhat. He angrily turned off the light and lay down, frowning out of the window.

He tried not to feel hurt. But he knew that Mo Ran would not even have considered what Chu Wanning had been obsessing over all day: that this would be the last night they slept in the same bed.

"Idiot," he hissed at himself, pressing the heel of his palm to his forehead. "Stupid, dirty *idiot*."

He'd had a filthy little plan bobbing subconsciously in the back of his head, to forgo any painkillers tonight, to instead feign sleep and then study Mo Ran's face. To see it sketched in the silver moonlight. To look for as long as he wished, without fear of discovery. To fix it in his memory, so that in the future he could imagine that he was lying beside him out of choice.

Disgusting.

He sat up again and switched on the torch on his phone to rummage through his bag for his painkillers. Outside the cicadas were screeching; their pulsating song was usually one he found soothing, but tonight it was the wrong pitch, and it whined sharply inside his head.

Cicadas, he thought as he took a larger dose than usual. The symbol of absolute integrity, because they lived high in the trees and ate only air and dew, like immortals. A million symbols of the integrity he lacked, screaming at him in the darkness.

It made him think of the passage from the *Shiji* about the death of Qu Yuan. “Estranging himself rather than bathing in filth, he molted like a cicada departing from dirt and pollution, soaring free above the floating dust; thus he did not suffer the contamination or befouling of the world…”

Purity and integrity. And the price was a bone-deep, soul-killing loneliness.

He thought of the jade cicadas placed on the tongues of the dead in the Han dynasty, to act as psychopomps into death. Like white pills.

He carefully put his painkillers away, ignoring how the light from his phone skittered on the concrete floor.

Just last night he had thought about the poems of Li Shangyin, and now another came to mind. How could he have forgotten his poem *Cicada*?

Pure of heart and therefore hungry,

All night long you have sung in vain –

Oh, this final broken indrawn breath…

The green trees do not care.

He almost had to laugh at himself. Right. No one cared, so he could forget the self-pity. What was he really upset about? Being in love with his student? It was a problem that he had brought entirely on himself, out of his own weakness, and so he had absolutely no right to be so maudlin and perversely self-congratulatory. He was not pure of heart. Not saying anything and not acting on his desires were the very minimum of acceptable behaviour, but he still sullied himself with the thought of it.

Sullied Mo Ran with it.

He was finally falling asleep when he heard the door open and a tread on the steps.

“Shizun?”

He sighed, and the remnants of anxiety eked out of him, leaving exhausted anger in its wake. “I’m asleep.”

“I’m sorry. I ran into Ling’er, then I went for a walk…”

Oh. *Oh.* Chu Wanning knew who Ling’er was – the pretty college student who had been so enamoured with Mo Ran.

So *that’s* where he’d been.

“I lost track of the time, I’m sorry… I’m just going to turn the light on, and I can put your sheets on-“

“Don’t bother. I did them.”

“But you can’t get the right tension on your own, it’s impossible...”

“It’s possible, because I did it.”

“Are you angry?”

“No. I’m going to have to do them on my own from tomorrow onwards, aren’t I?”

“You sound angry.”

“Because I’m trying to sleep. Do I look angry?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m not.” Chu Wanning rolled over to show Mo Ran just how not-angry he was trying to look.

He can’t have been doing a very good job of it, because Mo Ran’s face fell. He looked so forlorn and so devastated that Chu Wanning sat up, embers of anger doused, feeling like the biggest bastard on Earth.

“I’m not angry,” he said, and closed his eyes as the room shifted around his heavy head. “I’m just tired. I’ve already taken my painkillers. If you… If you and Ling’er…" The thought of it brought acid to the back of his throat, but he forced himself to continue. "I mean, if you’re both happy to, there’s no need to come back here to me- I, I’ll see you in the morning-“

“No, no, no,” Mo Ran said, and he sat down on the bed. The cicadas almost drowned out his voice. “I mean, that’s what *she* wanted, but I… I really did just go for a walk.”

He had no right to feel happy about that. Oh, he was scum. “As long as you’re all right,” he said, and half-heard the slur in his voice. “No landslides…”

“No landslides,” Mo Ran promised. “I can do your back, if you want?”

“It’s fine. Really. Maybe they’re not as tight as how you do them, but one night won’t hurt. Feels quite nice to have a break…”

“Right,” Mo Ran whispered; Chu Wanning really couldn’t hear him over the cicadas, but he was facing the window, and the moonlight was bright.

He could just lean forward. He could lean forward, and let his lips ghost across those beautiful lips, press so briefly against where he knew Mo Ran's cheek dimpled…

When he smiled. Where it dimpled *when he smiled*. And if Chu Wanning were to ever do such a horrific thing, a smile would be the last expression on Mo Ran's face.

All his earlier melancholy slammed back into him; it really did make him think of a landslide, the weight of it as cold and heavy as wet soil.

He covered his eyes with his forearm and lay down, rolling over to hide his face. "Right. I'm ready. You can turn the light on."

"It's okay. I can undress in the dark…"

"Not without showering. Go on. Go on!" he said, voice muffled by his arm and the pillow.

He felt Mo Ran hesitate for a moment. But then he turned, and climbed down again, and Chu Wanning was left alone with the cicadas.

They shrilled him up and down a ladder of consciousness, in and out of sleep. He must have slept at some point, because he woke, gasping and finding only hot, thick, moist air, like steam in his lungs.

He didn't know what he had been dreaming; he only knew it had been something devastating, something old, something that kicked away the supports on which he'd built himself. Waking brought a flood of relief that it had been a dream, and he shattered; the tears he had swallowed earlier bubbled up like water from a spring, impossible to stop.

"Whuzit..?" Mo Ran said beside him, jerked out of his own sleep like a fish on a line, and there he was, *there he was*, hair tousled and sleepy-eyed and everything that Chu Wanning

could never, ever have. “Are you- You’re crying…?”

He shook his head, because his breath was hitching too painfully to speak. And Mo Ran drew him down, one hand cradling the side of his head, pulling it to rest on his cotton-clad chest.

“Don’t cry. Please, please don’t cry. What is it? What’s the matter?”

“Cicadas,” Chu Wanning managed to gasp.

“Too loud?” Mo Ran covered his other ear with his hand. “They sound like an alarm… It’s all right. There’s no alarms. No fire. Don’t cry, don’t cry…”

One ear pressed to Mo Ran’s chest, thrumming with his heartbeat. One ear hidden by his warm hand. That loud, cruel voice in Chu Wanning’s head was captured and suddenly, blessedly silent.

There was no biting insult. No taunt. No cold observation of how ugly and wicked and pathetic he was.

He was *held*, suspended in a cocoon of Mo Ran’s touch and the song of the cicadas. His eyes slid closed even as the tears wet the cotton of his t-shirt, and his breathing fell in time with Mo Ran’s so easily it was like his body had been waiting his whole life to find that rhythm.

He felt a knot in his chest dissolve, some stone between his ribs that had been lodged tight for decades. Something that he hadn’t even realised was there anymore, he was so used to it.

Then, in the passing of an instant, it was day.

Chu Wanning came to consciousness slowly. He felt so comfortable, so warm and heavy; for once all the electricity under his skin was gone. His nerves were silent. His head was quiet.

The pillow under his cheek was warm and firm. It rose and fell just a little – how strange. How strange, but not uncomfortable…

The final drop into wakefulness was like missing a stair in the dark; he slammed back into the room in Yuliang, and realised all at once that he was *lying across Mo Ran*.

Chu Wanning leapt up and back, a cat spotting a snake, and only partially registered the arm that had been across his back.

“Mo Ran! I- I’m just- I’m so sorry-”

Mo Ran sat up, eyes wide, looked back at him with a guilty expression on his face. He was clearly already awake, had been for some time, and he had endured such an uncomfortable and inappropriate position out of the kindness of his heart.

How could he have done this? He had survived all week, sleeping curled up tight, and now he had fallen at the last hurdle.

“Shizun-”

Chu Wanning stepped back; he crossed his arms and dug his fingers into his biceps. “As soon as we get to Sisheng I’ll report my inappropriate behaviour. I won’t challenge the outcome-”

“Wait, wait, slow down – what?”

“My…” Chu Wanning helplessly gestured between them.

Mo Ran blinked at him.

“For... For *that*? You were asleep!”

“That’s no excuse.”

“Of course it’s – no, it’s not an excuse, because there’s nothing to excuse. We’re sharing a bed because of an emergency, it was bound to happen.” Mo Ran stood up from the bed. He was holding his hands out like he was trying to calm a panicking animal. “You woke up in the night, you were upset, I pulled you down. So if anyone’s in the wrong, it’s me.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “No. I’m your teacher. I am the responsible party.”

“That’s bullshit. And. Ahh… Well. You’re not, actually.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Just because it’s the summer-”

“I’m not being ridiculous. I finished my degree. I graduated.”

“Semantics.”

“You like semantics.”

“In two months, you’ll be my student again, and this will- I will- I have to- Either I have to transfer you to another supervisor, or I have to resign.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. *Stop*.” Mo Ran walked around the bed and took his hands. “Shizun. Wanning. Look at me.”

He couldn't. It felt as though he was wearing a collar of lead, dragging his head down. His eyes flicked to the level of Mo Ran's mouth, and then fixed on the floor again.

"First. You haven't done anything wrong. Nothing unwelcome or inappropriate or upsetting. You've done *nothing* wrong."

"But-"

"*Second*. You are not my teacher anymore, because… I really wanted to tell you before, but I just haven't been able to find the right moment. I'm not doing the doctorate."

Chu Wanning looked up then. Mo Ran's violet-black eyes bore right into his own.

He felt the floor beneath their feet collapsing.

He had been grieving that their time in Yuliang was coming to an end, but he'd thought that at least he would still see Mo Ran in the lab. But now Mo Ran was telling him that he wouldn't even have that.

"Is it…" He swallowed. "Is it because of the bomb?"

"No!" Mo Ran still hadn't let go of his hands; Chu Wanning tried to pull them free. "No, no – please, just listen – it's just not *me*, a doctorate, I never even thought I'd finish school, let alone a degree! But it's too abstract, too academic – I want to work *now*. I want to build, I want to help people – the last week has shown me that even more."

"You could do that with a doctorate…" Chu Wanning whispered. His gaze darted away; the eye contact with Mo Ran was so intense it felt physically painful.

"If I got one. I'm not like you. I don't have the patience. I don't have the focus. My uncle's going to find me a job in the construction side of the business, let me work my way up."

“Is it…” He couldn’t say it. “Is it because…?”

“It’s because that’s what I want to do. And because… Listen. I used to think you were *such* an asshole.”

Chu Wanning closed his eyes and yanked his hands again; Mo Ran didn’t let go. “No, no, please, just listen! I *used* to think that. I used to think that you weren’t… That you didn’t act like other supervisors because you were arrogant. And then you always said that us going to dinner or hanging out would be inappropriate, and I thought you were just making up rules because you didn’t want to. But I get it, now. I know what happened to your supervisor, and what they did to you, and I know now that all this time you were protecting yourself. And that you really were trying to do the right thing. That you really are just that… good.”

The guilt was unbearable. If Mo Ran *knew* what Chu Wanning felt – if he knew why he was so careful, so distant – he’d be disgusted. He’d never touch his hands again. “Please don’t.”

“No, I have to say this. When we get back to Wuchang, I don’t want to stop hanging out. With you. I don’t want it to become inappropriate again. I don’t want to have to think up some stupid engineering question just so I can ask you to grab some food, because it takes me fucking ages and it’s a pain in the arse.”

Chu Wanning blinked. The cicadas’ song pulsed in his ears. “You… made it up…?”

“I just wanted to spend some time with you. With my friend,” Mo Ran said, and he was being so *careful*. Chu Wanning could hear it in his voice.

It was justified. If Mo Ran hadn’t been, he might have thrown himself out of the window.

“You’ve helped me academically for years,” Mo Ran said. “That’s… Hm. I think… that’s not the kind of help I need anymore. What I really need is… to look after you.”

Chu Wanning didn't respond. Couldn't respond. He felt sick; he felt faint. He *wished* he could faint; just check out of this conversation into forgiving oblivion, and hopefully smash his head open on the concrete on the way down. He couldn't speak, and he couldn't think.

Nothing he had done for Mo Ran was anything for which he had ever expected a return, or even gratitude. He had hidden as much of it as he could, for fear of Mo Ran feeling indebted to him. Forced out of obligation to like him.

But that mask of indifference had been a shield as well. The bomb had torn it off, and now as he tried to fit it again, Mo Ran kept stilling his hands. Not letting him protect himself again.

He felt completely overwhelmed.

"Shizun?"

Mo Ran was speaking so… earnestly. So sincerely. As though he genuinely, truly wanted Chu Wanning's company. As though he really wasn't angry that Chu Wanning's paranoia had landed them in this whole ridiculous situation in the first place, or that he had slept on his chest all night.

"Are you… are you okay?"

Mo Ran released one of his hands. Chu Wanning closed his eyes – and then nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt Mo Ran touch the back of his head instead.

"Wanning?"

Teeth clenched to stop them from chattering, Chu Wanning met Mo Ran's eyes.

"Just… nod if you're okay. Okay?"

He failed the first attempt; it was more of a spasm than a gesture of affirmation, but it seemed to satisfy Mo Ran.

"Good. That's good." He squeezed Chu Wanning's hand.

Mo Ran wanted to look after him. It was of course what he had been doing all week – fetching doughsticks and cleaning the shower and defending him and shouldering conversations and every night looking at his hideous back without a word and applying the dressings for him – but to hear him *say* it felt like something entirely different.

Something so warm felt like someone had just thrown a kettleful of boiling water across the frozen surface of his soul; the violent cracking was agony, and louder even than the cicadas.

The thought was familiar. He had had it before.

When he had decided to kill himself, he had thought of the decision as a glacial wind, freezing his shame and guilt and pain. He'd thought then that Mo Ran was the only thing that could shatter the ice.

This was all because of the roof.

"You don't need to." Every syllable needed to be forced up his throat; each one was barbed, but he *had* to say it. He had to release Mo Ran from that burden of perceived obligation. "I'm fine."

"I know," Mo Ran lied easily. "But I want to."

"I don't need it. I know-" He gritted his teeth. "I know. What you saw. On the roof. Was."

“What?” Mo Ran’s face fell. “No, no, that’s not it.”

“*Never.* Should have seen that. *Never* should have. Put that. On you. Unforgivable-”

“No. *Stop,*” Mo Ran said. “It’s nothing to do with that. Think. Think, and pay attention to me. When did I start going into your office every morning for coffee? When did I start dragging you to lunch with me every day? December. It wasn’t the roof. It’s not because of that. It’s because you’re *good* and you’re *my friend*. You’re funny and interesting and fucking annoying a lot of the time, but I prefer spending time being annoyed at you to just about…” Mo Ran sighed. “I’m not bullshitting you. Not about this.”

He couldn’t move. It was too much, altogether too much. He was trembling like a fly-stung horse.

“Mo Ran!”

Chu Wanning jumped again; Mo Ran did too, his hand fisting in Chu Wanning’s loose hair. “Sorry, sorry,” he said, letting go and smoothing it down. He pulled them both behind the wall so that they couldn’t be seen through the window.

“Mo Ran? You up yet? We’re all going to the tunnel, we need to clear it before the digger arrives!”

Mo Ran moved to the side to look out of the window. “Yeah, I’ll be down in just a minute!”

Chu Wanning used the moment of distraction to free himself and slid along the wall. He dodged Mo Ran and stumbled down the stairs, making for the sanctity of the bathroom in which to stitch together the tatters of his heart.

Chapter 36: Means, Motive, Opportunity

Mo Ran was careful not to bring up the conversation in the guesthouse during the drive back to Wuchang. Having accused Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si of acting like the policemen from Chu Wanning's horrific story, he had no intention of being another person who trapped Chu Wanning in a car and demanded answers from him.

So they listened to the news on FM99.8, Mo Ran driving slowly and carefully, Chu Wanning staring out of the window.

A week ago, his uncle had rung him at the gym and asked him to drive to Chengdu and back. It should have taken ten hours – twelve, tops. Instead, it had taken a hundred and seventy.

And almost every one of them had been spent with Chu Wanning.

It wasn't that unusual. Lectures, tutoring sessions, supervisions. Hours in the lab.

Coffees and lunches.

He had spent hundreds upon hundreds of hours with Chu Wanning. And yet… Those hours last night had been different. In those hours last night, Chu Wanning's head on his chest, hair soft as petals under his calloused fingers, he had felt so calm. He had woken with the dawn, and just stared as the sun climbed, watching it tease out strands of walnut and taupe and umber, highlights of chestnut and russet, from the sleepy fall of black.

They were living in a concrete house out of duffel bags, with a freezing shower, in the Sichuan summer heat. So how the hell did Chu Wanning smell of flowers? Mo Ran didn't dare to move his head, lest he wake him up and end this blissful dream, but he had brought a lock of his long hair up to his lips and marvelled at the floral scent of it. The feeling of it between his fingers, like raw silk snagging on the blisters from the shovel.

So many times, he had thought of Chu Wanning was *inhuman*. Carved from wood, from ice, from stone. An unfeeling robot. Cold and ruthless and inflexible.

He thought it again, now, but this time, the thought was laced with wonder, rather than contempt. How could someone like this be real? How could someone be so beautiful, so brilliant, so sweet?

How could someone so *good* even bear Mo Ran's company? His touch?

Because… Because. He had seen what Chu Wanning was like when Xue Meng hugged him. When Xue Zhengyong knocked his elbow. Stiff, awkward – wooden. But Mo Ran had held him three times now. Yes, always in extremis – the alleyway, the hospital roof – or in sleep. But Chu Wanning curled against him like they were two halves of a taijitu, face buried in his shoulder, hand spread protectively over Mo Ran's heart…

No. It was wishful thinking. A fantasy that Mo Ran had no right to indulge in.

Damn Ling'er. He'd thought that just *lusting* over Chu Wanning had been painful.

He drove them to Chu Wanning's flat first, and insisted on carrying his bag up the stairs. He unlocked the door, and then, not without reluctance, handed the key back to Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran was very proud of the flat. All the walls and windows had been fully washed down. The floor was sparkling. He'd cleaned inside the fridge, the washing machine, and all the cupboards. He had ended up giving in and just buying a new bookshelf, which meant that all of Chu Wanning's books were finally off the floor. He had patched the ancient leather of the sofa, cleaned out the air conditioner, and scrubbed the entire bathroom. The *penzai* were thriving, as were all the houseplants.

Chu Wanning was speechless. "What… Is this a new sofa?"

“No, I just patched the old one, on the corner, there. Apart from that it was just a couple of wax treatments.”

“But the… The books…”

“I worked out your organisation system, don’t worry; it’s all by language, then subject, then author.”

“It doesn’t look like the same place.”

Mo Ran laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Tell me about it.”

Oh, but it was worth it, to see Chu Wanning go to each one of his plants and check its leaves and soil, to stand on his tiptoes to see the top shelf of books, to blink at the brightness of the gold light reflecting off the Tianwen sheet-plating and glittering on all his awards from CNSA, to trail his long fingers across the strings of his guqin.

“I only dusted that, I couldn’t bear the thought of breaking it.”

Chu Wanning nodded. “It’s… incredible.” He looked across the room at him. “Mo Ran, you did this?”

Mo Ran smiled back at him. Mentally, he tried to fix Chu Wanning’s expression in his memory. “I promised I’d look after your plants.”

“But it’s not just the plants – all of this, this is…”

“It’s like I said on the phone. It was… I needed a place to calm down. A lot of times. Somewhere away from people asking about the bomb, asking if I was okay, asking if they’d caught him. And you said that I could use here.”

Chu Wanning was staring at something at about the height of Mo Ran's knees. "On the phone…"

"Yeah…" Mo Ran studied him. "It was the least I could do. Gave me something else to think about."

Chu Wanning exhaled sharply and sat down on the sofa with a thump. He looked down at the new rug underneath the coffee table, and his breath hitched.

Mo Ran blinked, and his smile faded a little. "Are you okay?"

"Mn." Chu Wanning inhaled. Exhaled. Fixed his eyes on his guqin.

He stayed like that for a long moment, then turned, and his face was still and impassive once again. "Yes. I'm all right. I apologise."

Mo Ran gingerly sat down on the sofa. "No need…"

"It's the same, but it's not, and I-" Chu Wanning looked at him, stared right into his eyes. "It's the same. But it's not."

"I mean… yeah?"

Chu Wanning shook his head. "I just realised that it really happened," he finally said, voice very soft.

"What? What happened?"

“The bomb,” he said. “It really… I thought that I’d realised it, but I just… There was a person in the hospital in Ya’an, and then there was a person in Shanghai, and then one in Yuliang, but those… those people are the same as the one who lived here.”

“Ah,” said Mo Ran. “Of course. You’ve not been back since…”

“Since leaving for work that morning. For our lab time… That’s why I’m so grateful to you. I was just imagining what it would have been like to come back to all the plants dead, the post piled up, the- the mug of tea where I’d left it.” He folded his trembling hands in his lap. “Thank you.”

“It was a pleasure,” Mo Ran said. “It gave me a project too. A safe space.”

“When did you feel it?” Chu Wanning asked. “When did you register it, I mean?”

“For me it was earlier – in the hospital. Seeing you. That’s when it became real.”

Chu Wanning’s eyes were huge. Mo Ran couldn’t meet them; he didn’t like to think about the last five months. Five months of self-loathing and remorse. Five months of crippling guilt.

“When I came back to Wuchang… I didn’t feel it at all. That I was the same person as before the explosion. I think… I actually felt like the person who’d just arrived, right back when the private investigator found me. Living with the Xues, them being so careful around me. That kind of… cheerfulness. Probably to make up for Xue Meng barely speaking to me. No one knowing what to do with me, everyone whispering when I went to lectures.”

The wretched, soul-killing guilt. The blood on his hands. The lies.

“And honestly…” He realised something else. How could he have been so stupid for so long? “Just coming back to Wuchang and Sisheng didn’t feel like coming back to myself because you weren’t here.”

Chu Wanning looked away from him. Once, it would have hurt Mo Ran to the core, interpreting as an implicit rejection. But now… he knew it was a gesture of self-protection. That Chu Wanning was overwhelmed.

He had the feeling of holding something infinitely precious and infinitely fragile in his hands.

"When I arrived, you were the first person who treated me like a human being," he continued, very carefully. "My uncle and aunt were kind, they really were *so kind*, but I sometimes felt like I was a… some *thing* that they'd been looking for and found after a long time. What I was like didn't matter, just that they'd found me. I was Their Nephew, not Mo Ran. I was an interloper or a dog to Xue Meng. Gossip or a street urchin to everyone. Everyone except you. You were the one person who got to know *me*. Mo Ran, the person."

Chu Wanning's hands were fisted in his trousers. His hair hung around his face, concealing it, but his ears were bright red. "Mo Ran, the pain in the neck."

He laughed. "Mo Ran, the back-talker."

"Mo Ran, the clown."

"Mo Ran, the loudmouth."

Chu Wanning's breathing had finally evened out. "Mo Ran, my cleverest student," he whispered, and tore Mo Ran's spine out through his abdomen. "The kindest. Mo Ran, who moved earthworms off the pavement."

The blood in his heart felt like champagne; the air in his lungs was like light. "What? Earthworms?"

“In your second week,” Chu Wanning said. “It was raining. A sudden storm. Everyone was running in to shelter, but you were squatting down under an umbrella. You looked… like a little mushroom.”

Mo Ran could hear the affection in his voice, but only just, over the pounding of his own pulse.

“I asked what you were doing. And you were using a stick to lift the earthworms off the path, back onto the grass. Then you walked me back to the building, holding the umbrella.”

Chu Wanning sighed, and lifted his head. The curtains of his hair fell back. “That’s who I nearly killed.”

“*No*.” Mo Ran said it so firmly, so sharply, that Chu Wanning actually looked up at him. “Don’t do that. *You* didn’t do anything. Someone else did, and we’re going to find the son of a bitch and then I’m going to kill him.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “We’re never going to know. The police-“

“Fuck the police.” Mo Ran turned so that they were fully facing each other. “Your cop friend. Do you really think it could have been his dad? Nangong Liu?”

Chu Wanning blinked, and his face settled into a different expression: one of calculation. Mo Ran was so used to that expression that something was soothed in his chest; if Chu Wanning was thinking through a problem, an answer wouldn’t be far behind. It was an expression that made him feel safe.

“Have you ever heard of the indicators of suspicion?”

It was so like the beginning of a Chu Wanning Lesson™ that Mo Ran couldn’t help but smile when he shook his head.

“Means, motive, opportunity."

"Shit, yes, got it. They always talk about that on murder dramas."

"Yes, excellent. So. Does Nangong Liu have the means to send a bomb?”

“The bastard’s rich as fuck. His enforcer will know a guy who knows a guy. Easy as anything.”

“And we know that he has the psychological means. The willingness to kill.” Chu Wanning glanced down at the rug again, eyes haunted. “Next, motive.”

“He’s running for Mayor of Shanghai. I looked him up. He’s currently the frontrunner. But that means that the stakes are higher too. He’s famous now – properly, nationally famous – it doesn’t need to actually go to trial to ruin his life. Just the accusation from you would derail everything for him.”

Chu Wanning was nodding; he looked calmer too, as they fell back into their comfortable roles. “Good. Now, finally: opportunity?”

“Opportunity… I mean, with no idea how he did it, he can’t exactly provide an alibi, can he?” Mo Ran thought. “No… No, his opportunity was the hate mail. You said back in December, the first time we were categorising it…”

“The article in November.” Chu Wanning got up and went to a large metal filing cabinet. He unlocked it and brought out a folder from the middle drawer. “It will be… Here.”

He had two copies of the article – the original spread in *People’s Daily*, and a print-out from the website. In the interests of presenting some kind of image of neutrality the headline suggested that it was a discussion on the role of academics in society, but two thirds of it

were just a hit piece, using Chu Wanning as the prime example of the danger presented by disloyal intellectuals, complete with a large portrait, and a photograph of him at CNSA, leaning over what must have been a part of the Mars Rover.

Mo Ran skim-read it. Most of it was a brief overview of Chu Wanning's life and career, along with a paragraph about the Shangqing trial and quotes from the military about how Chu Wanning was a saboteur.

But something else leapt out for Mo Ran.

"'A source who was close to him as a student told our reporter, 'Chu Wanning was always arrogant and ruthless, but this was not entirely his fault. What many people don't know about him is that as a result of his mental disorder he is self-enclosed. Some people with Self-enclosure Disorder – or Loneliness Disorder, as it's also called – show brilliant talent in certain areas like music or mathematics, which he did, but it also explains why he doesn't think of the protection of the people, only of his own reputation.'"

The paper crinkled in Mo Ran's hands. *Robo-autist. Sexless Savant*. He felt sick.

"Could it possibly…" Chu Wanning was reading the print-out. "He knew about my diagnosis – he was the Principal of Rufeng University, and I was underage when I started there. But that's… Could he have been the source? Weaponising that stigma, manufacturing the outrage, so a bomb could be passed off as coming from anyone who read this article? Even from him, I find it hard to believe."

"Really? You'd believe he'd send you a bomb, but not talk shit about you in a newspaper? If he's the source in this, he created the opportunity. Too many suspects. A million different leads from all the shitheads who-" He stopped, jaw tight.

Chu Wanning's brow was furrowed. "I suppose… he did that with Rong Yan as well. He set the pattern of behaviour so that she didn't suspect anything was wrong…" He rubbed the exhaustion from his eyes. "All right. Let's suppose for a moment that it was Nangong Liu. Someone else knows. Whoever sent that note to A-Si."

“Assuming they did. Assuming he didn’t write it himself.”

The corner of Chu Wanning’s mouth lifted; he flicked the centre of Mo Ran’s forehead. “Don’t be so open-minded your brain falls out. Yes, assuming for the moment that he was telling the whole truth, which I believe he was.”

Mo Ran thought that Chu Wanning usually thought the best of people, but he had to admit that he wasn’t exactly unbiased when it came to Nangong Si, King of Twats. “Okay, so. Someone who knew what he did to your supervisor. Who did you tell?”

“That’s the thing,” he replied. “No one. The only people who would know are Nangong Liu, myself, and the two police officers. Li and Chen. And what motive would they have for that note? If their conscience was troubling them, then they’d go public, surely, rather than contacting his son. If they wanted money, they’d contact Nangong Liu directly.”

“None of the other police? Paramedics?”

“Not with enough certainty, I think, if they did have any suspicions. And we have no way of finding them out. And again, why would they contact A-Si? There’s something personal going on, not political.”

“No one else? No one in the days after asked you about it? No other police?”

“No, none.” Chu Wanning was frowning though. “But… No. Not police. But there was a man – there was a man!”

He got up and went straight into the bedroom. Mo Ran heard the sound of something being dragged, presumably from under the bed, and then Chu Wanning came back, carrying a metal box.

It had a combination lock – Mo Ran saw him turn the numbers to 1420.

“1420? Is it a date?”

“Tsk. 1420 megahertz is the hydrogen line. It’s what allowed us to calculate the rotation curve of our galaxy. It’s also part of the L band, which is a range of protected frequencies. It’s reserved for astronomical research; terrestrial transmissions are forbidden.”

Ah, Mo Ran thought. No military. Only science. Only the sky. A protected frequency, a combination lock.

“I always use 6969.”

This surprised a huff of amusement from Chu Wanning. "Shameless." Then he opened the box.

Inside were notes of scrawled handwriting. A booklet with a woman’s face on it. A paper chrysanthemum. And a Dictaphone.

“Rong Yan’s funeral.”

Chapter 37: Paper Flowers

Chapter Summary

> Phew, I'm sorry this one took so long again, I was unwell during the week, but it's extra long to make up for it! 💖

Chu Wanning pressed the rewind button on the Dictaphone. “I’ve not listened to it since,” he confided. “I was too ashamed.”

“Ashamed?”

Chu Wanning was staring down at the little machine in his hands, and Mo Ran felt a building, blinding rage. What did Chu Wanning have to be ashamed of?

“I don’t know what I was thinking. That I could get him to confess to everything… I was such an idiot.”

“You were young,” Mo Ran said. Young, he thought, and obsessed with justice and righteousness. Expecting everyone in the world to have as much integrity as he did.

Mo Ran was the opposite. He knew the great mass of humanity as selfish, greedy, thoughtless and self-satisfied at best. Cruel, sadistic, and malicious at worst.

At sixteen, Mo Ran wouldn’t have approached Nangong Liu with a Dictaphone. He’d have used a knife.

“It was worth a shot.”

Chu Wanning didn't lift his head. "He ran circles around me."

"He'd had a lot of practice already at being a manipulative piece of shit," Mo Ran said with a smile. Inwardly, he was thinking of himself.

The Dictaphone clicked. Chu Wanning exhaled slowly, staring at it, face turned away.

Mo Ran knew why: he was feeling vulnerable and embarrassed. So he edged further on the sofa, and took Chu Wanning's hand.

Chu Wanning looked at him in surprise; Mo Ran smiled encouragingly. "I'm right here. Press play."

He obeyed.

"My name is Dr Chu Wanning. The date is the 4th of August 2010."

Mo Ran felt Chu Wanning's start through their joined hands. "Thirteen years ago tomorrow," he whispered.

"I am at the funeral of Dr Rong Yan, in Linyi, Shandong Province."

It was heartbreaking, listening to the audibly younger Chu Wanning beginning his recording as he always did for every video lecture, every audio note. Name, date, location.

There was a long period of muffled noises. "I had it in my suit pocket," Chu Wanning said. "This was after the procession, after the burial. I'd gone for A-Si – obviously he was leading, with the portrait – but it was… it was hard. It was very hard."

“Of course.”

“Dr Nangong. May I speak to you?”

“Oh, of course. It was very good to see you today.”

“In private.”

“Ah… I have to stay with my son, A-Ning.”

“Don’t call me that. I can speak here, if you’d prefer.”

A sigh. *“Very well. Over here.”*

The sounds of shuffling, walking, cicadas. *“Very well. Dr Chu. I know that you’re not very well at the moment, but I can’t stay long – my son needs me.”*

“Your son needs his mother. But you can still… Water recedes. Rocks appear. These are facts. The truth will eventually come out. Won’t it be better for him if the truth comes from you?”

“Not this again-”

“You killed Rong Yan, it’s not too late to confess-”

“It is my wife’s funeral-*”*

“That you caused! You can’t use that excuse when you’re the one who killed her. Doing so is yet another insult.”

Chu Wanning’s mind was as sharp as a knife, slicing through social constructs to find the moral heart of any question. So was his voice. A sharp voice, but brittle, and now it was cracking. While Nangong Liu’s voice was like water – soft, flowing, elegant, and closing swiftly over any line Chu Wanning tried to score.

“Chu Wanning. I have been extremely patient with you, on account of your youth, your mental illness-”

“I do not have a mental illness.”

“And your home-life, but this has got to stop. *Right now. I understand why you’re so upset. I completely understand. Your own mother left you for dead-”*

Mo Ran felt the tremor that ran through Chu Wanning. He clenched his hand. Left for dead?

“She didn’t-”

“But Rong Yan was not - your - mother. *She was Si'er's. I know you’re used to being the centre of attention, but he needs us both to be supporting him today.”*

This was a direct hit; Chu Wanning’s voice was wavering. *“Supporting him would be telling him the truth.”*

“How? Hypothetically, in your insane world, how does robbing him of both parents help him? How does a trial? How does the notoriety? The uncertainty? No. This isn’t about helping Si'er. This is just about you feeding your own obsessions and your own delusions. My wife-”

“Your ex-wife.”

“We were married.”

“She was divorcing you.”

“According to you. And only you. Where are the papers that you swear she signed?”

“Her lawyer will have a copy. She had copies. You can destroy your own, you can pretend that you’re a grieving widower rather than an adulterer and a murderer, but it will eat away at you.”

“These papers that I was supposedly refusing to sign never existed.”

“Maybe it won’t today, or tomorrow, but year upon year the guilt and the paranoia will compound, and it will poison you from the inside.”

“Please, Wanning. I’m concerned about you. I’m concerned about your mental health. And because of that I’ve been as charitable as I can be, but if you didn’t think of her as a replacement for your mother, perhaps you were thinking of yourself as a replacement for her husband?”

“You’re sick. You’re sick in the head!”

“You’re projecting. And it stops now. Rong Yan’s death was a tragic accident, and she would be devastated to see the additional hurt you’re now causing her son.”

“You killed her. You murdered her. I was there!”

“You told the police that you were in the bathroom. Not in the hall. You can’t keep your own story straight. Were you a witness, or were you in the bathroom?”

“I heard you. I heard- I heard-!” There was a muffled sound.

“You heard her fall. I understand, A-Ning. You want to believe that someone’s to blame. But they’re not. My wife fell. She died. And you need to stop harassing me and my son. All you’re doing is causing more pain and suffering, and she would never have wanted that. We’re not going to have this conversation again. Or I’ll call the police, and I will have you arrested for harassment.”

A bomb went off in Mo Ran's head, and then the icy sensation of dreadful recognition was gone. He knew... No. He knew those words, said in a Linyi accent. That was all.

Nangong Liu’s voice was suddenly very kind. *“She would never have wanted you to cause yourself more pain and suffering either. Stop here for a moment, calm down, wipe your face, and then come and say goodbye to Si'er.”*

Chu Wanning’s knuckles were white; the bones of Mo Ran’s fingers ground together. There was a long moment where the only sound from the Dictaphone were the small grunts and sobs of the young Chu Wanning, audibly non-verbal.

Mo Ran leant forward and turned off the tape.

Chu Wanning looked up at him; his face was a white mask. “It’s not over yet. The man-”

“The man can wait.” Mo Ran gently squeezed Chu Wanning’s hand. “That was fucked up.”

Chu Wanning looked away. “I know. It was utterly idiotic. As I said, he ran rings around me.”

“No! I mean, *he* was fucked up!”

Chu Wanning looked at him suspiciously. “You don’t believe him?”

“What? Shizun, I don’t…” He tried to swallow the bile of hurt. “Of course I don’t believe him.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did. I know that he sounds so much more reasonable. That I sound… insane.”

“I don’t believe him. I believe you.”

A muscle worked in Chu Wanning’s jaw; there was a line between his brows. “I… There were nights when *I* believed him. When I could almost convince myself that I’d got it wrong. It would be easier to think it had been an accident. But I couldn’t. Some nights I believed him and made myself remember, and some nights I wanted to believe him and couldn’t… And some nights I just didn’t know any more.”

“That’s exactly what he was trying to do. Make you doubt yourself. Make you doubt your memory. He’d be a good cop, like his fucking son – I’ve been questioned a few times, and a good one will make you think you really did…” He shook his head, and smiled. “I can see why he’s a politician. What did he study, law?”

Chu Wanning relaxed just a little. “Well, yes… Physics, originally, like Rong Yan, but he gave it up after his Master’s, trained as a lawyer.”

Mo Ran laughed; it wasn’t funny, not at all, but the sight of Chu Wanning looking so uncertain was breaking his heart. “There you go, then. He’s a piece of shit. Honestly, you might not have got a confession out of him, but you can hear on that what a manipulative bastard he is.”

You couldn’t, really; Nangong Liu was too good for that. He sounded sincere and patient. But it made Chu Wanning relax a little more again, helped a little more of the self-doubt seep from his face again.

“You okay to go on?”

“Of course,” Chu Wanning said, but while his voice was haughty, his eyes flashed to Mo Ran’s in gratitude.

There were muffled sounds, and then suddenly the audio was clearer. If he had to guess, Mo Ran thought it was Chu Wanning walking away, and taking the Dictaphone out of his pocket.

“St- stupid! Stupid! Stupid, stupid, so stupid *– hey!”*

“What was that?”

Mo Ran stopped the recording. “Nangong Liu came back?”

Chu Wanning was frowning at the Dictaphone. “No. No, that was the man… But… But now you say it, I thought it was him at first. It wasn’t, but for a second I thought…”

“His voice is the same.”

“Maybe it’s just the Linyi accent?”

“Maybe…” Mo Ran clicked ‘Play’ again.

“Let go of me!”

“And what is this*?”*

“That’s mine! Give it back!”

A cold laugh. *“Now, this is a picture. You just brought the grieving widower from his wife’s funeral for a fraught private conversation and secretly recorded it. What possibly couldn’t have waited?”*

“Who are you?”

“Whatever you wanted to get from him, you never will. He’s too good. Silly little boy… Aha. I get it. You must be the student.”

“Let go of me!”

There was a crackle of distortion and then a quiet noise of pain. Mo Ran felt it in his own throat, felt it like ants under his skin. Next to him, Chu Wanning shifted in embarrassment.

“Stop squirming or I’ll break your arm. I heard that there was a boy in the house the night she died. Not her son. But a famous child prodigy…” The man laughed again, terrifyingly humourless, and Mo Ran heard the young Chu Wanning try to struggle. *“She always had a soft spot for prodigies. Her supervisor, her fiancé, and then her student. She must have been* so *disappointed in her son.”*

Mo Ran paused it again. “Nangong Liu was a child prodigy?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. His eyes were huge and dark, and his hand was pressed tightly to his chest, as though he could calm the fluttering heart within. “No. Her supervisor was. Luo Fenghua. And her fiancé… Another child prodigy. Just twenty, when they were engaged. Rong Yan was a few years older. They were both Luo Fenghua’s students.”

“So she was engaged to someone else before she married Nangong Liu?”

“To his brother,” Chu Wanning said softly. “Nangong Xu.”

“What the *fuck*?”

“They weren’t engaged for long. A couple of months afterwards it came out that Nangong Xu’s Master’s thesis was all work he’d taken from Nangong Liu. He did Physics first, remember? His brother produced all the evidence. Luo Fenghua didn’t believe it for a second. He tried to fight it on Nangong Xu’s behalf. But Nangong Liu said that his brother had burnt out, was worried about becoming one of those… ‘bitter and twisted washed-up child prodigies’.” It was clearly a quotation from somewhere; Chu Wanning’s mouth was twisted as he said it. “He’d begun to feel the pressure, and had taken one of Nangong Liu’s old papers and reworked it.”

“But if *he* was the prodigy…”

“Exactly.”

“And Rong Yan believed it?”

“I don’t think she did at first. But… in the disciplinary hearing, it came out that… Luo Fenghua and Nangong Xu had been sleeping together.”

“What the *fuck*?!”

“Mn. There was a video, apparently. Nangong Xu was stripped of his degree. Luo Fenghua hanged himself. That broke Nangong Xu. He split up with Rong Yan and vanished.”

“How convenient.”

“Mn. And then, as the search went on, she and Nangong Liu grew closer, and…”

Mo Ran didn’t want to speak against Rong Yan, whom he knew Chu Wanning had loved. But for *fuck’s* sake. “I thought the drama in *our* lab was bad…”

Chu Wanning darted a sharp look at him. “We don’t have any drama.”

“I mean, we also don’t have a *lab*.”

“... touché.”

Chu Wanning, of course, didn’t know what Mo Ran knew about Shi Mei. Rather than give either of them time to think about *that* clusterfuck, Mo Ran played the recording again.

“There’s more than one type of cleverness in the world, you know, and I promise you, your kind will always lose to his. But for you to be so desperate as to try it here, what could possibly… Oh. A-Yan… Oh, now it all makes sense. Well. What’s one more, to a man like him? But you were trying to make him confess? You were there, that night, and you know… But can’t prove it. Of course.”

“Who are you?”

“Stupid little boy. But brave. Here. Have a tangerine.”

The button clicked, and the recording ended.

“I was scared of him,” Chu Wanning admitted. “There was something in his eyes… He looked deranged.”

“He sounds it,” Mo Ran agreed. “Do you think it is him? Nangong Xu?”

“It would make sense. And it explains why he’d send the note to A-Si…” Chu Wanning closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. “I should call him.”

“You should eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I didn’t ask whether you were hungry, I said you should eat.” Mo Ran looked at the funeral box, eyes lingering on the white paper chrysanthemum. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t. I don’t want anything. I want to have a hot bath and then sleep for fourteen hours.”

Chu Wanning was staring out of the window. He had crossed his arms and was digging his fingers into his biceps.

Mo Ran had seen him do this before. When he was upset, Chu Wanning grabbed himself. No one else. His instinct to bully him out of the door faded, and he just felt that gentle ache in his chest again.

Instead, he went through to the kitchen, and made a cup of tea. He brought it back to the sofa, and startled Chu Wanning out of his painful reverie.

“What?”

“I still need to buy you a new mug,” Mo Ran said softly, “but this’ll do for the moment. If you give me the key again, I’ll go out and get something. Call Nangong Si, then have a bath. Then you can eat and go straight to bed.”

Chu Wanning looked at him in a daze. Mo Ran stared him down, surprised by how long Chu Wanning was maintaining eye contact, until he nodded.

"Could you…?" He looked so unsure, so hesitant.

"What?" Mo Ran said. "Of course, whatever it is."

"Perhaps you could get something for both of us…?"

The astonished joy felt like a firework going off in his head. Mo Ran nearly laughed. But Chu Wanning really looked as though he was expecting Mo Ran to say no. It made no sense – why would eating with Chu Wanning be so much more of a request than just delivering the food? Hadn't they been eating together for the past week?

Was that it? Chu Wanning thought that Mo Ran would be sick of his company by now?

"Oh, don't worry, I was going to!" he said. "Sick of me, are you?"

"No!" Chu Wanning said, and the instant response sent even more happiness fizzing under his skin. "No, I- I just thought…"

"I'll buy this one, but to be honest, I *am* the one who did all the driving."

Chu Wanning blanched, visibly worrying that he'd made a faux pas; he began to dig through his pockets, and Mo Ran stopped him.

"Nah, don't, I'm not going to get anything fancy. But maybe tomorrow or the next day?"

"You mean to…? You want to?"

“Your choice, but it was the longest drive between Chengdu and Wuchang of my life, so it might even need to be more than one dinner,” Mo Ran said, grinning.

“... okay,” Chu Wanning whispered.

“Okay.” He couldn’t stop smiling. “Give me the keys, and I’ll be back in a bit.”

Mo Ran beat a retreat before he said anything even more ill-advised, but the short trip to the closest hole in the wall felt as though he was walking on air. He stopped at the 7-11 for some snacks and a couple of microwave meals as well; Chu Wanning seemed to have developed a canned drinks obsession while he was in Shanghai, judging by his orders in the little restaurant in Yuliang.

When he got back Chu Wanning was nowhere to be seen, but he could hear a faint splash from the bathroom. He plated up the food, and tidied the funeral box, closing it again. Chu Wanning was like a gentle chaos elemental, strewing mess wherever he drifted.

With that in mind, Mo Ran opened up Chu Wanning’s duffel bag. He needed to do something to occupy his thoughts while Chu Wanning was so close, warm and wet and naked…

Occupy his thoughts, and his hands.

He might as well put on a load of laundry while Chu Wanning was in the bath. They’d done what they could, but the Sichuan heat and humidity had taken its toll on both of their unexpectedly limited wardrobes. Chu Wanning, as clean as a cat, had had a few outfits that he could wear, but even he had resorted to pairing t-shirts with pyjama bottoms by the end of the week.

A single duffel bag after five months, and most of the space was taken up with medications and compression braces and support straps. Mo Ran put the ones that were still sealed to one side, and decided that he would wash the others by hand, not knowing what the machine would do to the elastics.

So many pills. So many pills, gels, creams, straps - boxes and boxes of Cica-care sheets, thousands of yuan's worth.

Other than that... There was next to nothing. Phone, tablet, chargers, headphones. Chu Wanning had shared the clinic's gifts of tea and mooncakes and face-wipes with him while they were in Yuliang, and he'd brought the plum-scented soap and the Liushen shampoo and conditioner with him into the bathroom.

Mo Ran hoped that the clinic had been a pleasant place. He hoped that it had had plants and music, and that it was dark and quiet at night. He told himself that it probably had been nice; they might now be in need of a wash, but the t-shirts and loose trousers and pyjama sets, all royal blue and proudly emblazoned with 'Shanghai International Recovery Clinic', were good quality, soft and stretchy, woven without seams to irritate healing skin as little as possible. They would have looked after Chu Wanning for him.

He gave the duffel bag a final search, and found a stray pair of socks, for some reason zipped in the innermost pocket of the lining.

Mo Ran frowned and undid the wadded bundle. They weren't socks. They were two fraying t-shirt sleeves.

They were the ones he'd cut off that first morning in Yuliang, when the top he tried to lend Mo Ran had been painfully tight across his shoulders and arms.

Why the hell had Chu Wanning kept these? They'd been folded carefully around a small paper flower. That's why he kept them? To protect this?

Who the *fuck* was giving Chu Wanning paper flowers?! What the hell?!

There was a scrap of writing inside one of the folds. Without thinking, Mo Ran began to pull it out of its ornate design - was the paper from the clinic in Shanghai? Given to him by whatever whore of a doctor Chu Wanning had cut his hair for?

Blood boiling, he smoothed out the paper.

Good morning, Shizun!

It's about six o'clock, but everyone's going to start digging so I'm going with them. Rural people wake up so early, haha! I'll text at lunchtime, let you know how we're getting on, and I'll be back for dinner. There's new doughsticks under the cover on the table in case you're hungry when you wake up.

I hope you're having a good sleep and a nice dream, and that you rest and relax today! Don't you dare try and come digging, I know you! But your job is to relax and recover and let someone else look after you for once. Though maybe you can phone Uncle and let him know what's going on? See you later!

Mo Ran's hair stood on end. It was his note, the one he left for Chu Wanning on their second morning in Yuliang.

He had left it, unfolded, on the bed.

Chu Wanning was the one who had folded his note into a flower.

Why the hell had he kept it? Folded it into a five-petaled flower, kept it wrapped up and safe in the innermost pocket of his duffel bag?

In the sleeves he had cut for Mo Ran... In the fabric of the shirt Mo Ran was wearing...

The air conditioning was *fierce.* Mo Ran's flesh was standing up in goosebumps.

Why would he have done this? He could understand Chu Wanning being bored and folding his note into a flower before he threw it away, but why on earth would he have kept it as though it was something he needed? It was just a note Mo Ran had dashed off in his terrible handwriting because he didn't want Chu Wanning to worry about him.

His body was always more intelligent than his mind was. His heart was racing, his stomach was twisting, but his brain refused to register the most obvious explanation.

Because it wasn't obvious. This kind of schoolgirl-with-a-crush gesture was about as far from Chu Wanning as it was possible to be. Chu Wanning, sentimental?

He pictured a white mug with gold butterflies and orchids on it. Used day after day, week after week, until the foil began to fade away.

He felt Chu Wanning clinging to him, mittened fingers pressing into his back, the anguished sobs against his throat. *"The mug's broken!"*

His head was spinning. Chu Wanning was lonely, he told himself - maybe he'd keep any note from a student. Any sleeves he cut off his own t-shirt...

Mo Ran had called him his friend, and Chu Wanning had run out hiding tears. This morning, Mo Ran had said that he wanted to look after him, and he'd practically had a panic attack. He'd trembled, squeezing his eyes closed, completely overwhelmed by Mo Ran's words.

And he'd kept this note? These sleeves?

"I thought that man had stabbed you. I thought he'd stabbed you in the heart, and I- I thought it had happened again, but to you- *I couldn't-"*

"Mo Ran, you- you can't. We can't. I'm your teacher*..."*

“I’m sorry... Mo Ran, I’m sorry...”

“I haven’t been the teacher you deserved, Mo Ran. I’ve been… You deserved better than me.”

“Not you. Please, please*, not* you*. Go downstairs, Mo Ran.”*

“I don’t want you to look at it. You*... I don’t want you to look at it.”*

No. *No.* Last night Mo Ran had realised that he was in love with Chu Wanning, and now he was thinking that maybe…

He couldn’t even think it. It was too ludicrous.

Chu Wanning liked... *him?*

He was fucking delusional. He’d gone absolutely, utterly, completely, 100% *nuts*. There was wishful thinking, and then there was legitimate clinical insanity.

There was another splash from the bathroom. Mo Ran realised with sudden life-ending clarity that next door, Chu Wanning was naked; that he would come out, and Mo Ran could tear the towel from him, throw him onto the bed, could kiss him and touch him and-

And then he realised that in his hands he held the note, and he had no idea how to fold it back into a flower.

Chapter 38: Kafka in Sichuan

Chu Wanning didn't ring Nangong Si. He had no wish to regurgitate their deductions so soon, and he sensed that he wouldn't be believed without the recording. Nangong Si hadn't exactly been quick to believe him in the hospital. No. He would make a digital copy of the tape first and send it to Nangong Si by e-mail instead.

He ran the bath piping hot, and his muscles began to unknot for the first time since leaving Shanghai. A cold shower could only do so much before he started shivering, but in a bath he could luxuriate. He sank under the water; the heat closed over his face and gently tendrilled along his scalp.

Mo Ran wasn't sick of him. Mo Ran had eaten with him, travelled with him, worked with him – even, even… *slept* with him – and he wasn't tired of his company. He was coming back with food, and they would eat together again.

Chu Wanning scrubbed his skin and hair until both squeaked, and the water was soap-milky and cool by the time he climbed out. Then he made the fatal mistake of stopping in front of the mirror to put up his wet hair.

With it drawn into a tight topknot, the lines of his face were unshrouded. The new scar that scored across his left temple was red from the heat of the bath. He hadn't paid enough attention to it; he ought to have been using the Dermatix twice a day on it, but he'd let it slide by the wayside, too embarrassed to use it in front of Mo Ran, lest he thought he was vain.

The only mirror in Yuliang had been tiny, high up on the wall and pocked with dark spots. But the mirror in his own bathroom was obscenely large. He could see his face in its entirety.

The scar was from a nail that had missed his eye by millimetres. He could see that when he was older, it would join any wrinkles that formed around it. This, impossible as it was to believe, was as good as his face would ever get. Scarred and marked with red blotches from the hot bath. Cheeks bony. Chin pointed. Lips thin, twisting fiercely. Eyebrows cruel and severe, eyes cold and arrogant.

His heart fluttered in his chest at the sight, mingling with a new nausea. “Ugly,” he whispered, and sick anger began to rise within him. “You’re so ugly.”

Every time. Every time he felt even the least bit optimistic, the least bit acceptable for human company, he caught sight of it – his face, sneering at him from the glass, reminding him of how unbearable he really was.

So unbearable that even his own mother had tried to love him and failed. Failed so atrociously that a long, quiet sleep in the snow had seemed better to her. Better for him to be dead than so unloved. Better for her to be a murderer than his mother.

Frustration like steam inside his lungs. “Why do you look like this?” he asked his reflection, and saw the ugly face become uglier. “How can... You look like this? Like *this*? *Ugly*.”

He thought of Mo Ran, with his beautiful black eyes, his blinding smile, his strong jaw and his dimples. Splendid, charismatic, at-ease and stunning with it.

He thought of Shi Mei; his smooth, soft face, his large peach-blossom eyes, his gentle smile. It made him want to shatter the glass and never look at his reflection again. There was no comparison.

The quiet joy that had come from Mo Ran being so caring washed out of his soul, leaving it cold. It was obligation, that was all. Obligation because of the bomb, fear because of the roof.

In comparison to Mo Ran and Shi Mei, he was an ugly old man, looking only older and uglier after his weight loss. In a few days, he would be thirty – he was probably thirty already. He had no idea when his real birthday was. He was found in the snow on the 9th of February, sleeping in the silent, freezing night, and the doctor who looked over him estimated that he was about eighteen months old. So he was assigned the birthdate of the 9th of August, just like he was assigned the surname Chang.

Only the name Wanning was personal to him. He was found under a tree in the garden of Jingci Temple. It was the site of the one of the ten famous Views of West Lake: Wanning, named for the Nanping Wanzhong, the Evening Bell at Nanping Hill.

His mother had tried for eighteen months. Until about the time when she could not longer deny that her baby wasn't returning her smiles like other babies did, wasn't meeting her eyes like others did, laughing like others did, talking like others did. As quiet and as unresponsive as a statue carved from wood…

A statue, or a tree, left in a garden of statues and trees.

He turned out the light. He didn't want to see his face anymore.

His phone, tablet, chargers and headphones had been placed on his bed. Knotting the towel more tightly around his hips, he opened the door. "Mo Ran?"

"Yes? Ah, do you want help with your scar sheets?"

"Yes, but that's not… where's my bag?"

Mo Ran stood by the sofa and rubbed the back of his neck. "I put on a batch of laundry while you were in the bath, and to be honest, the duffel was smelling a little funky. Don't worry, I emptied all the pockets."

Chu Wanning's stomach plummeted, right down past his feet, through the floorboards, through the three flats below his.

He'd seen it.

"Front, back, side and side," Mo Ran continued.

"Not – it has five pockets."

“No, four.”

“There’s another one inside. In the lining,” Chu Wanning said. His mouth was dry, his scalp was freezing.

“What? Oh, shit…” Mo Ran met his eyes, briefly, and then looked at the washing machine. “Fuck, I’m sorry. Was there anything…?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. The heat of the bath and the patter of his heart made him feel light-headed. “No. No, just… just a rag. Nothing important.”

“I’m sorry, I should have checked better. I just wanted to put it on and have it clean for you…”

“Thank you, but don’t… In future, please don’t go through my bag. I can do it.”

“Sure thing.” Mo Ran gave him a shaky smile. “I got ribs. And some cans of Coke.”

“Oh, no Coke, please. I’m sick of it. You go ahead though.”

It was a genuine pleasure to drink clean, cold water. Mo Ran was now a practised hand with the Cica-care sheets, while Chu Wanning applied the Dermatix to his forearms and shins. He opened a drawer for a pair of pyajamas, and drew out a sandalwood-scented sachet.

“What is this?”

Mo Ran grinned at him. “Make your clothes smell nice…”

“I’m embarrassed for you.”

“We’re in Sichuan, Shizun!” he said with a laugh. “They capture humidity, stop your clothes getting mouldy.”

“We’re in the mountains. I have air conditioning.”

“Air conditioning doesn’t smell of sandalwood. I had plenty of time being dirty and smelly and poor. Now I like to have nice things. I’m not going to apologise for that.” His smile softened. “You deserve them too.”

Chu Wanning felt his ears grow hot. He put the sachet back in the drawer, and went into the bathroom to change into his own pyjamas. The silk felt cool on his back, but the collar irritated his neck. The waistband of the trousers was too loose.

They ate, and made plans to meet again tomorrow. Mo Ran said he wanted to go to an expensive Western restaurant, the only one in Wuchang, and Chu Wanning agreed to meet him there at eight.

He didn’t.

As it was, he was exceptionally glad that he’d insisted on a hot bath and an early night. He was woken by a pounding on the door at four in the morning, and he found himself being driven back along the familiar roads to Ya’an. Six days from Ya’an to Wuchang, and then back again in a matter of hours. He caught a glimpse of Yuliang in the dawnlight through the grated window of a police van.

You had to laugh.

He felt more exhausted than scared. He was kept in a cell, uncuffed, rather than a chair, and was given his mobile phone to make a call to his lawyer. He had experienced interrogations meant to frighten and interrogations meant to terrify, and this was the former; a power-play to

remind him who was in charge upon his return from Shanghai. But the cell was uncomfortable, and the questioning was long. It was particularly undignified to still be wearing his ivory silk pyjamas.

He suspected that the police had no idea who had sent the bomb to him, and in the absence of any leads, were attempting to some fault in him. It didn't look good for them to have made no arrests, after all, and the case had made them notorious. Petty revenge, more than real danger, he thought. But however petty the revenge was, his back still ached after two nights on the thin plastic mattress, after two days on the unpadded metal chair in the interview room as he was asked, ludicrously, over and over again about Sisheng's insurance policies.

It was strange to compare his relative calmness to the panic he had felt on the train, and at night he stared at the ceiling of his cell, trying to quantify the distinction. It was probably the fact that he had been given his phone call, he thought. He wouldn't vanish into the aether. His disappearance was a known element. He was given a cell with a toilet and a bed, instead of left cuffed to the bolted chair.

He'd been detained for the first time before his first trial, and that had been three months of hell. Five since then had all been these short ones, meant to remind him who was boss. The exception was a four-month RSDL stint immediately after the Supreme People's Court ruled in his favour; when he'd emerged, he had been fired from CNSA, but had received an offer to relocate to a small university in the Daxue Mountains…

And yet, Chu Wanning had never been as nervous as he'd been on the train back from Shanghai to Chengdu. The plastic squeaked as he rolled over.

Mo Ran. That was all he could think about. The difference was Mo Ran. On the train from Shanghai he'd been dreading the thought of seeing Mo Ran again. They had had their phone calls, but Chu Wanning wasn't the best at hearing tone, or expressing himself, and he'd been so worried that when they saw each other again, Mo Ran would have returned to his contemptuous anger. Instead, he'd been kinder and more confident than Chu Wanning had ever known him.

Mo Ran would be all right. Chu Wanning could disappear now, and his greatest regrets could still be helped. Mo Ran was all right, and knew about Rong Yan; he could help Nangong Si.

He was released at half past eight in the morning on the 6th of August; a calculated humiliation, so that he'd be seen leaving the police station in his prissy pyjamas by all the commuters of Ya'an.

Instead, he was immediately flanked by his lawyer and Mo Ran, who wrapped a coat around him despite the summer heat.

"What the hell are you- They only said I was being released an hour ago, how did you get here in time?"

Mo Ran looked *terrible.* Pale, with deep shadows under his eyes. He was staring at the police station with murderous loathing, lip curled like a snarling dog.

"He insisted on driving me to Ya'an," Zhu Ruoxuan said. "We've been staying in the hotel over the road. They wouldn't let me in."

"It's all right. I think it was revenge for having the audacity to be bombed, and to show them up for not being able to solve it," Chu Wanning said. "I'm all right."

"Did they hurt you?" Mo Ran said, eyes still fixed on the door.

"No, I'm fine. Just tired. I think they were trying to suggest that I'd sent the bomb myself, as some kind of insurance fraud. I don't even *have* life insurance."

"Typical," Zhu Ruoxuan said. "We should file a complaint in Chengdu."

"Maybe. Can we talk about it later?"

"Of course. Did they mention RSDL again?"

“A few times on the first day, none yesterday. I thought it was unlikely, if they let me call you.”

“That’s right, but you never know. I’m glad you’re all right, Dr. Chu.”

Chu Wanning smiled tiredly. “Thank you for coming. I know it’s not without risk for you.”

“It’s my job, and a pleasure. Or an honour, perhaps, rather than a pleasure, *per se*,” Zhu Ruoxuan said with a wry smile. “I think it’s been an education for your friend as well.”

“Perhaps you’ll go into the law, like Nangong Liu,” he said, and regretted it; Mo Ran looked at him furiously. “Sorry, sorry. As I said. I’m just very tired.”

“I’ll drive you back,” Mo Ran said tightly, and Chu Wanning felt dread curdle his relief.

“I really am sorry. Chengdu to Wuchang, Wuchang to Ya’an, Ya’an to Wuchang. It’s Kafkaesque.”

Mo Ran visibly tried to work out what Kafka was, and just as visibly gave up. “Let’s go.”

The journey back was fraught. Chu Wanning longed to sleep, but he’d already taken up too much of Zhu Ruoxuan’s time, so they both sat in the backseats and went over the interviews while Mo Ran, white-knuckled, drove in the front.

They dropped Zhu Ruoxuan at his office in Wuchang. Chu Wanning felt dead on his feet; he followed Mo Ran up the stairs to his flat and let him unlock the door.

“I really am sorry,” Chu Wanning apologised for the third time. “I suppose after we were delayed in Yuliang I thought that- umph!”

Mo Ran grabbed him, in a bone-crushing, back-breaking hug. He pressed his face against Chu Wanning's scarred temple so hard that he saw stars.

"When my uncle called, I was so- I'd only just realised, and then you-"

"Mo Ran, are you…?" Chu Wanning, confirming it as he spoke: Mo Ran was crying.

Sobbing.

"We didn't know if they'd stay in Ya'an or bring you to Chengdu, Mr. Zhu said that if they moved you to Chengdu then we probably wouldn't be able to see you again, he told me about, about the designated locations and it being six months until a trial, but there weren't any *charges*-"

"I'm fine," Chu Wanning said. He experimentally rubbed Mo Ran's back. "I'm absolutely fine. It's all all right now."

"You were in a *cell*, and you didn't have your painkillers or your care sheets or your propranolol, what if your heart had been bad? What if they'd- you must have been in so much pain-"

"I was okay. Just some aching. You've been taking such good care of my back, it doesn't hurt anymore…" he lied in a whisper. He tried to take a step back, and Mo Ran made a heart-rending noise. "Just to sit down on the sofa. Come on. Just sit here…"

He was able to sit, but Mo Ran immediately curled against him, face pressed into his neck. It was just like the way they'd woken up in Yuliang, what, three days ago? It felt like so much longer.

It should have felt suffocating, but it didn't. Mo Ran's weight squeezed all the anxiety out of him.

Almost sleepily, Chu Wanning raised a hand and began to stroke Mo Ran's hair. It was something that comforted him. Maybe it would comfort Mo Ran too.

"It's all right now. They were just being bullies. The only way to stand up to bullies is to make them hear how ridiculous they sound. I'm absolutely fine, and you were right there so I wasn't wandering around Ya'an in my pyjamas."

"They didn't even let you *dress*-!"

"It's the summer, it's fine. It's all fine. Mo Ran… You're exhausted."

"Couldn't sleep."

Chu Wanning hummed. "You can sleep here," he offered without knowing why. "Then you'll know…"

"Know where you are…"

"Right here," Chu Wanning promised. "And when you wake up, I'll take you out for dinner, hmm? Like I said. You'll have to forgive me for being a little late…"

Mo Ran's sobs were quieting down. "I'd only just realised…"

Chu Wanning's fingers were very gentle. "Realised what?"

Mo Ran mumbled something inaudible against the skin of Chu Wanning's throat. He blinked slowly. It had been a hard week. Maybe it would be permissible to close his eyes for just a few minutes…

Chapter 39: A True and Profitable Sorrow

Chapter Notes

NEXT CHAPTER, I PROMISE, NEXT CHAPTER!

They didn't go out to eat that night either. Chu Wanning woke up after sunset; he was lying on the sofa with a pillow under his head and a blanket tangled around his legs.

There was the sound of bubbling; a thump, a splash, a sizzle. He rubbed his eyes, and saw Mo Ran in his kitchen, surrounded by pots.

"Hey!" Mo Ran turned down the hob and ran to him immediately.

"Sorry…"

"Don't be. You were tired. I was too, I only woke up about an hour and a half ago." Mo Ran's voice was still strange, still unlike his own – soft, but unsure. Shaken.

The feeling of Mo Ran's gaze on him felt scorching, like light through a convex lens. Now that all of Mo Ran's attention was focused on him, it was so overwhelming Chu Wanning felt it like a physical pain, as though being the focal point of all that attention was branding his skin.

"Are you cooking…?"

"Yeah. We can go out another time. I think just… You know. Safer to stay in."

Chu Wanning touched his sleeve in acknowledgement and sat up, pain spasming in his back. "Ah-"

A single sound, a single involuntary acknowledgement of pain, but it brought exponentially greater shame with it.

Mo Ran opened his mouth to say something and apparently thought better of it. "Go and shower. That'll help. You'll feel better then."

Chu Wanning wanted to say that he wasn't a child to be ordered about.

No.

He didn't *want* to say that. He needed to. He needed to shove away Mo Ran's concern, to prove that he didn't need *that*, that he wasn't going to be *obedient*. He was independent, and stoic, and proud, and those qualities were his shield and his armour.

But shields were heavy. Armour was heavy. And he was *tired*, and for once, it felt easier to lay them down, and just allow himself to enjoy the strange sweetness of obedience.

By the time he emerged, clean and dressed, Mo Ran was setting down two bowls of soup. The colour was light, bright greens of water shield and delicate shades of peach-pink shredded chicken. Chu Wanning blinked, and looked at it more closely.

"Is this… This is West Lake water shield soup."

Mo Ran smiled. "That second time we ate lunch together, when I was teasing you about not liking spicy food, you said that you came from Hangzhou."

Chu Wanning felt happiness, alien and unfamiliar, rising in his chest like a cloud among mountains. "Do you think I'm thinking of perch and water shield?" he asked, citing the old

shorthand for being homesick.

"I just thought you could use something that you really liked, so I looked up Jiangnan recipes. There's pork and celtuce as well, with a little ginger and Chinkiang vinegar."

"You don't find it insipid?" Chu Wanning had never seen Mo Ran order *qing dan* food, let alone cook it.

"No. It's not as dramatic as Sichuan food, but I like it, and I see why you like it too. It's like… Du Fu's poetry instead of Li Bai's."

Chu Wanning felt ice pool in his feet and rise to his scalp. "You've read Du Fu?"

"I noticed he's your favourite. The books. The calligraphy. Like, most of them are Du Fu, so I thought I should read some of him. And a lot of the books sort of compared him to Li Bai, so I read some of him as well." Mo Ran smiled, and his dimples deepened. "They're a bit like you and me, don't you think?"

Three nights, you've been in my dreams…

Chu Wanning busied himself with his soup. "Comparing yourself to Li Bai?"

Mo Ran laughed – the first laugh he'd given since they returned from Ya'an. "In the drinking, maybe, if not the poetry. Speaking of which…"

"Oh, yes, of course," Chu Wanning said; he got up, but managed not to react to the new spasm in his back. He rarely drank alone, except on festivals, so he had a collection of bottles which had been gifted to him over the years. "What would you like?"

"Something from Jiangnan? To match the food?"

“I ought to have asked for something in Shanghai, but I think it would have sent them into a panic. It was a very health-conscious place. Ah – I *do* have some mijiu, but I don’t have any ice.”

“You do – I bought you an ice tray. It’s in the top of the freezer.”

An ice tray was one of those things he had never owned; it felt like an unnecessary luxury, one extra element in the flat of which he had to keep a mental track. Unlike work, keeping his flat tidy and well-stocked was overwhelming, exhausting.

Chu Wanning filled two glasses with ice, and brought them over with the mijiu. “It always felt like a needless extravagance. I mostly drink tea, and if I want something cool, I just put it in the fridge. The ice waters it down.”

“You’ve got an addiction to Coke now though,” Mo Ran said as he poured. “Coke with ice just tastes better.”

“I’m not a fan, to be honest,” Chu Wanning admitted. “It tastes nice, but you can feel it on your teeth… The diet version is better for that. But even that *fizzes*, it hurts my mouth.”

“Oh. I thought… Thought you’d developed a liking for it – you ordered it every night in the restaurant, and you had, like, three cans of it in your bag…”

“I picked them up in the business lounge before I got on the train. I was worried that if they didn’t have sealed water bottles, or if the hot water machine was out of order, I wouldn’t have anything to drink.”

“Don’t they have people going up and down? Especially in business.”

“Ah, but…” He busied himself with his soup. “It’s very silly. They sometimes open the can for you, and then I’d have to ask for an unopened can, and then they’d be angry… It was just another interaction I didn’t particularly want to endure. They got used to it in the clinic after the first month or so, it just became Dr. Chu’s Little Eccentricity.”

“But I don’t…”

“Well, you know – sealed water bottles, unopened cans, hot water from the communal machine… They’re all safe.”

“Safe?” Mo Ran’s voice was tremulous. Chu Wanning felt the familiar oily clench of guilt; Mo Ran was younger than him, Mo Ran had cried himself to sleep a few hours ago. Chu Wanning was the one who needed to be strong. Needed to be invulnerable.

“It’s nothing. It's stupid. This soup is excellent.”

“Tell me.”

“Just… That night in January, before the bomb…”

He dared to glance up at Mo Ran’s face, to see if he remembered, and watched, stunned, as the blood drained from his face. It was darkly, horribly fascinating to see, to watch it turn in just two seconds from the bright gold of honey to the colour of beeswax.

Chu Wanning felt ill. It was visible on Mo Ran’s face just how traumatising that night had been for him. To see his teacher inexplicably lose control of his legs, have a seizure in the road – to stay up with him all night, making sure he didn’t choke on his vomit…

What was he *doing*? Why the hell was he still *socialising* with Mo Ran, after what he’d put him through that night? The enormity of his own selfishness left him reeling.

Chu Wanning put down his spoon. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it.” *I shouldn’t be doing this.*

Mo Ran shook his head tightly. “You have nothing to apologise for. Please don’t. But I don’t… I’ve poured drinks for you. Fetched you drinks. You didn’t…”

“That’s different. It's... it’s when it’s a stranger, someone I don’t trust-“ Chu Wanning said, and jumped as Mo Ran suddenly surged out of his seat. The ice tinkled in the glasses, and he remembered ice in glasses, ice lit with pink and purple neon lights, and he pressed his hand to his head-

“I’m sorry, shit, I’m sorry.” Mo Ran slowly sank down again. “I’ve not… I’ve tried not to think about- That night was…”

Chu Wanning swallowed, and nodded. “A mess. And you were the one who-”

“Please. I mean it. Please don’t.”

“I ended up in the hospital anyway,” Chu Wanning said, trying to make light of it. It palpably failed.

The evening didn’t so much melt away as congeal. The food was excellent, but for once it fell to Chu Wanning to carry the conversation; Mo Ran was muted, distracted, nodding and vocalising at the appropriate moments as Chu Wanning gave an impromptu lecture about Tang poetry. And while he talked, Mo Ran would just… *stare* at him, with those gleaming dark eyes, and Chu Wanning just couldn’t read his expression for the life of him.

He stayed only long enough to help Chu Wanning wash up and store the leftovers, unusually quiet. Chu Wanning waited for him to offer to help with the silicon sheets, and when he didn’t, he actually considered asking him. But that was too difficult, too far, and so he bid him goodnight.

He didn’t hear from Mo Ran for two days. Chu Wanning even sent him an e-mail, a single agonised-over line asking how he was.

It received no response.

He chastised himself for being surprised. They’d been together more often than not for close to two weeks now. He had become spoilt by so much of Mo Ran’s presence; he had to get used to loneliness again.

No. Solitude. He liked solitude. Solitude was safe. He hadn’t had true solitude since the bomb went off.

He tried to enjoy the solitude. He converted the Dictaphone tape into an audio file. He read his books. He played his guqin. That at least gave him genuine joy; he had missed his guqin. But the songs he found himself playing were all… lonely. Lonely.

It wasn’t Mo Ran who broke the solitude, but Xue Zhengyong, inviting him to a dinner party the next day. A celebration of his return; he was as kind as he always was, saying how much Xue Meng had missed him, how devastated he’d been to be away when Chu Wanning left the clinic, he had so much to tell him about his thesis and the robotics competition – he’s through to the international finals, you know! But don’t tell him I told you, he wants to tell you himself, so pretend to be surprised, eh? Mo Ran said he’ll pick you up and drive you, I think that boy wants his new job to be your chauffeur, haha!

A dinner party. To celebrate his return. That just happened to be on his thirtieth birthday…

“So, full disclosure,” Mo Ran said the next night when Chu Wanning opened the door for him, but Chu Wanning barely heard him; he was wearing a new jacket over a tight white shirt, black and gold jacquard, subtle but undeniably rich.

“Hm? What?”

“Full disclosure,” Mo Ran tried again. “The ‘Welcome Home’ dinner is actually a surprise birthday party.”

Chu Wanning sighed.

“Yeah, I thought that might be your reaction, which is why I told you. But I’ve also been sworn to secrecy, so can you pretend to be surprised?”

Chu Wanning flexed his hands, clicked his fingers, and frowned. “How many people…?”

“God, not many – just us. They’ve not invited people from Sisheng or anything. Dinner, not party, really, but there’s a cake and presents.”

“Mnn,” Chu Wanning said, flexing his fingers again. “Well. Thank you for telling me.”

Mo Ran smiled at him. “Of course. And there’s also your favourite baijiu. And crab meatballs, and perch in soy and ginger…”

Chu Wanning looked up at him.

“And then for pudding there’s bingfen and tangyuan as well as the cake…” Mo Ran saw Chu Wanning’s creeping smile of acquiescence, and grinned. “They’ve been planning it since they got back from Baidicheng.”

“Well, it runs in the family; your uncle told me about Xue Meng reaching the robotics finals, but I have to pretend to be surprised at that as well.”

“We’re terrible, aren’t we? But they’ve been really worried. About you.”

“I’m fine.”

Chu Wanning didn’t feel fine. He hated his birthday, but being officially *thirty* felt abhorrent. He shifted back and forth a little.

He’d not known what to wear, and had eventually decided on a white silk top with a Chinese collar and pankou knots. He only registered that it was his Performance Outfit when he caught sight of himself in the mirror; he had always worn Chinese clothes for his guqin concerts, and it was his first choice for parties. But next to Mo Ran in his jacket, he felt three hundred years old, not thirty.

“I’m going to change,” he said, and went back into his bedroom, ignoring Mo Ran’s sounds of protest. He found a simple white Western shirt instead, and changed his trousers from black to pale grey. Smart. He wanted to look smart, and young, and put together – he was back from Shanghai, whole and perfectly healthy, incorruptible, irreproachable. Absolutely not looking as though he had spent a week sharing a bed with Mo Ran…

He added a grey suit jacket to the ensemble.

He looked like he was going to court.

Giving up – he was never going to look *cool* so he shouldn’t embarrass himself by trying – he went back into the main room. “How’s this?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you look… You looked great before, too,” Mo Ran said politely. He was sitting on the sofa, and he was clasping his hands in his lap. “Um. Shizun. Before we go, can we…? I just need to say something.”

Chu Wanning sat next to him. “What is it?”

His anxiety must have been audible, because Mo Ran shook his head. “Nothing – nothing you’ve done. But. Shit. Something… that I did. And I… I don’t know how to say this.”

He'd not expected that he'd have to take some propranolol before they even reached the Xues. "Mo Ran, what is it?"

Mo Ran drew a great, shuddering breath.

"I made a mistake. I made such a big, stupid mistake, and you were so hurt, and I- I don't know how to make it right again."

"We've been over all this, it wasn't your fault-"

"It *was*." Mo Ran's voice was fierce. "Please *listen* to me. It was my fault. But it was a mistake. I didn't- I'll never, ever do anything like that again. But if… Could you forgive me? For making a mistake?"

Chu Wanning sighed, and, against his better judgement, he touched Mo Ran's hand. He didn't take it – that really would be too much – but he rested his scarred fingertips against the back of his hand.

"Mo Ran. If it would help to hear it, then I forgive you. Entirely, completely, for everything you've done or think you've done. I need forgiveness too. I was too harsh on you, I was never… I should have been more understanding. But you… you are a *good person*. Good people can make mistakes. It doesn't make them bad. It doesn't make them… beyond remedy, or a waste of time, like someone we both know once unkindly said to you. And if you need proof of your goodness, just tonight you've tried to balance loyalty to your family and kindness to me. That's… *Quod erat demonstrandum*. The way you acted in Yuliang, the way you've helped me since I came back – the way you called me, every week. That was so… You're *so* good. You have my forgiveness, easily, if you need it, but I… I think you're great."

His eloquence had run out by the end, but it didn't seem to matter to Mo Ran. His face was shining. His eyes were certainly shining; he sniffed and dashed the tears from them, and Chu Wanning looked away in embarrassment, to let him save face.

Bu Mo Ran didn't think he needed to. With a featherlight touch on Chu Wanning's chin, he directed him to look back again, even as fresh tears spilt.

Chu Wanning gave him a small smile. "Okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

"Just don't do it again."

"I won't. I promise."

Chu Wanning reached up, and flicked the centre of his forehead. "Dummy."

"I am. A total dummy."

"You're all right?"

"I am. I am now. An all right dummy."

Chu Wanning huffed in amusement. "Good. Because I'm going to need your help tonight. I'm relying on you, to tell them all about Yuliang."

"I will," Mo Ran promised. He sniffed again, and wiped his face.

"Tsk. Do you not have a handkerchief? Well, I can't say anything, I don't either."

"Because your one was blown up," Mo Ran, and rubbed his face on his sleeve instead.

“Don’t-! Idiot,” Chu Wanning said, and went to get a towel from the kitchen. He chucked it over Mo Ran’s face. “There. Keep it like that, it’s an improvement.”

“Hey! I thought you were going to be kinder to me?” Mo Ran moaned, holding the towel to his head like a tragic maiden in an opera.

“That was kind. Constructive criticism,” Chu Wanning said, and he felt… happy. He actually felt happy. He never would have predicted it, that he could truly feel happiness on his birthday.

Chapter 40: A Long-Expected Party

Chapter Notes

> We're finally there! Chu Wanning's birthday, and Mo Ran's confession! 😭🥂🎂💮
>
> I sincerely can't believe that this is now 40 chapters long and over 120,000 words. I never imagined the fic would be this long, and I wanted to say thank you so, so, so much to all of you for reading and commenting - especially those of you who have been here from the beginning, and who comment on every chapter. I think I might have given up on this if not for you; you have no idea how encouraging and motivating your comments have been. I am so grateful to you. As thank you, this is a doubly long chapter, as I did promise that we'd get to a confession! 😭😅💖 Thank you!

The Xues lived in a mansion on the mountain, just above Sisheng University. Mo Ran remembered the first time he came up this winding path, and saw the huge gates opening, the Chinese design done in a modern style, all glass and shining metal.

The guilt had made him feel as though he was dead, a walking corpse with maggots writhing where his guts should be. A walking corpse. That would have been fitting.

Only, of course, there had been no maggots in *that* body. It had been… crispy. Like a piece of meat that fell into a groove of the barbeque and was only found when it had become a piece of coal.

The maggots were back, as he drove Chu Wanning up the hill. Only this time they shouldn't fucking be there.

Yes, it had been a tiny bit manipulative to let Chu Wanning think he was apologising for opening the parcel. But Mo Ran hadn't *made* him say that forgave him – what were the exact words? *"I forgive you. Entirely, completely, for everything you've done or think you've done."*

There you go. *Fait a*-fucking-*ccompli.*

Chu Wanning had forgiven him for the drugging. Forgiven him for kissing him, for slamming him against a wall and assaulting him and making him have a seizure in the meltwater of the road.

All those things were included under “everything”. Done.

And, you know, *telling* Chu Wanning now? That would just be cruel. That would be cruel to *him*. After all, Chu Wanning had promised – he’d hate to withdraw his forgiveness and make himself a hypocrite. That kind of thing was important to him. So, Mo Ran was forgiven, and all telling Chu Wanning would do now would upset him. Fucking hell, he trusted few people as it was – better for him to trust Mo Ran, who was absolutely, 100% NEVER going to do anything like that again, after all. And imagine the *Xues* – no, telling him now would just hurt all of them, for nothing. It was the kinder option, never to tell him.

So why did he still feel like such a piece of shit? Why were the maggots still squirming?

“They’re not going to jump out, are they?”

“What?” He glanced at Chu Wanning, suddenly seized by the awful thought that he could hear the maggots, that they were about to rise up out of his throat and spew all over the windscreen. “What did you say?”

“Jump out. If it’s a surprise.”

“Oh, no – Uncle wanted to, but then Auntie reminded him that jumping out of the dark might not be a good idea given the whole dawn raid thing.”

That’s what Chu Wanning was worrying about in the passenger seat. Whether he might accidentally commit the mortal sin of being startled when people leapt out of the dark shouting at him.

He wished… Fuck. The corners of his eyes prickled. He wished he was that innocent. He had been, once upon a time. He'd wanted to be good. He'd wanted to eat barbecue, and look after his mother, and be a good boy.

The beautiful, expensive gates creaked open for the beautiful, expensive car.

He wished…. He wished. He wished he could be more like Chu Wanning.

"You aunt is a marvel," Chu Wanning said. He was relieved.

Then he was worried, as he caught sight of Mo Ran trying to surreptitiously wipe his eyes. "We can wait here for a moment, if you need to. I wish I had my handkerchief…"

"I'm fine. I'm excited! Just emotional from earlier, haha. Ahhh, it looks nice all lit up from the outside, doesn't it?"

"Mn."

Mo Ran tried again. "The moon's really bright as well. Even if it's a half-moon."

"Waning crescent, technically."

"How do you know? You've been keeping track?"

"No. The illuminated side of a waning crescent moon is always pointed eastwards, and east is that way. So it's waning."

"Huh. Teach you all sorts at CNSA, don't they?"

Chu Wanning began to rummage in the footwell.

"You all right? What're you looking for?"

"Something to throw at you."

Mo Ran laughed; the maggots were a little calmer, at least. "Not while I'm driving!"

"You're parking, now, technically."

"Yeah, so more likely to ding Xue Meng's car, which'd result in a far more certain death than driving off the mountain."

Chu Wanning tensed up once they stepped out of the car; his shoulders came up, curling in as though that would protect him. Mo Ran sometimes wondered what he expected. The Xues to suddenly turn on him? But… Well. Given his guardian, he couldn't blame him for that.

"Wanning!" Wang Chuqing opened the door; she was the only one of them who called Chu Wanning by his given name. "Oh, look at you! Oh, I'm so happy to see you – and looking so well. We've been so worried – come in, come in."

"Yuheng! You're a sight for sore eyes – ahhhhh, you look so well! Let me look at you," Xue Zhengyong boomed, taking him by the shoulders. "What's this? New haircut?"

Chu Wanning shifted in embarrassment. "Some of the hair fused with the skin, they had to…"

"Of course, of course – it looks wonderful. Very… modern," and Mo Ran inwardly winced on Chu Wanning's behalf. "Xue Meng's in the main room, I told him to have that Pear

Blossom White you like so much chilled and ready to be poured! And we have another surprise…"

They walked into the main room, and Chu Wanning froze.

A tall, slender man rose from one of the sofas. His dark brown hair was perfectly cut and coiffed; his peach blossom eyes were sparkling in the candlelight; his perfect teeth gleamed in his perfect smile.

"I rang President Xue to ask if anything was being done for your birthday, and he very kindly invited me," said Hua Binan. "I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not," Chu Wanning said, with every impression of pleased politeness. "The more the merrier. It's good to see you."

"And you – wow! I honestly didn't think they'd let you out inside of nine months, but you always defy expectations, Chu-*laoshi*."

Chu Wanning shifted in place. To Mo Ran, he was clearly embarrassed. "All the staff really were excellent. They looked after me very well."

"Shi Mingjing sends his best wishes," Hua Binan said, and Mo Ran and Xue Meng shared a dark look. "I offered to drive him here tonight, but he said that he had a lot of work to get done."

"He was always very diligent," Chu Wanning said. He put one hand behind his back and flexed and clenched his fingers.

"Yes, he is. Thank you again for co-signing that bursary application, by the way. I know it was wrong of me to get in contact with you while you were recovering, but that six months will really help him. I think he'll submit by the new deadline; his writing is good for a scientist, so I'm not worried about the thesis."

“Let’s go and sit,” Xue Zhengyong interrupted. “I didn’t have any lunch to prepare for the feast, I’m starving.”

As promised, the Pear Blossom baijiu was flowing, and in addition to the traditional birthday long noodles and red eggs, Wang Chuqing brought out bowls of steaming rice cooked in pu’erh tea, perch in soy and ginger, the pork and crab meatballs in Shaoxing wine that Chu Wanning was addicted to, duck with salted plum in lemon sauce. Mo Ran shouldered the conversational burden, spinning their time in Yuliang into a comedy.

“You were lucky to find a guesthouse with two rooms,” Hua Binan remarked.

“That would have been great, but nope. We topped and tailed. You wouldn’t believe how loudly he snores,” Mo Ran said, and received a stab in the arm.

“*You* were the snorer. Don’t believe a word he says, Hua Binan.”

Hua Binan laughed. “Don’t worry, I don’t.”

“*HOOONK*-shpiu-shpiu-shpiu.” Mo Ran was stabbed again with Chu Wanning’s chopsticks. “Ow!”

Hua Binan laughed again. “I have actually travelled with Chu-*laoshi* before, you won’t fool me with that.”

That stopped Mo Ran. “Really? He said about going up and down the Yaxi highway.”

“Oh, that too, but yes, we went to a couple of conferences together. It was after he came to Sisheng, just after, so there were Xi’an and Harbin, nowhere outside China.”

Chu Wanning swallowed a piece of crab. “What was Xi’an – that was bridges, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but we went into Gansu as well, to meet that professor you wanted to introduce me to.”

“Qingyang! How could you forget Qingyang – the Qingyang Event. I know that you deserted us for medicine, but really, how could you forget that?” Chu Wanning said with a teasing smile.

“What’s the Qingyang Event?” Mo Ran asked.

“In 1490, there was a shower of rocks from the sky that killed at least ten thousand people,” Chu Wanning said. “It could have been a meteor air burst like the Tunguska Event, but no one’s found any evidence of extra-terrestrial material yet, so it might have been hail.”

“On a related note,” Hua Binan said. “I heard that you had a meat pie fall from the sky.”

“That’s only when you didn’t deserve it,” Mo Ran said, glaring at Hua Binan. “He earnt it all himself.”

“But it was very unexpected – that’s what Hua Binan meant,” Chu Wanning said, with a polite nod. “Yes, quite right. I actually travelled from Shanghai to Chengdu in business class. The seat lies down like a bed. I’d never expected to be a rich man, but I can now see why money corrupts.”

“No offence, Chu-*laoshi*, but you’re not rich. I mean,” Xue Meng said, “*we’re* not even rich.”

Mo Ran, Chu Wanning, and Hua Binan stared at him.

“We’re not! We’re well off, but we’re not *rich*. Dad’s not even on the Top 100 Richest in China list. He’s not even a *billionaire*. In fact, number 100 on the list has, like, three and a half billion US dollars, and Dad literally has one percent of that.”

“Auntie,” Mo Ran said cordially, “I need to apologise in advance: I’m about to beat the shit out of your son.”

“I understand; in the spirit of mercy, please don’t use a chair or a golf club,” Wang Chuqing said solemnly. “Fists only.”

“No, seriously! If we *were* rich-“ Xue Meng bit off what he had been about to say, and appealed to his mother instead. “Mum, you literally used to work for Jiang Xi, the richest man in China – *you* know we’re not in the same league as him! You can’t use the same word for us and for Jiang Xi!”

Xue Zhengyong coughed delicately. “Meng’er, we’re very rich. Very comfortable, very fortunate. Very rich indeed. Not just in money – we’re rich in family and friends as well, eh? Let’s toast to that!”

Chu Wanning raised his glass and drank. The corner of his lips quirked. “Zhengyong, as I am so rich, and your poor son so destitute, let me give him some pocket money.”

Zhengyong’s eyes lit up. “No, no, put away your wallet, Yuheng.”

“No, no, indeed,” Chu Wanning said. “I don’t actually have a wallet yet, I keep it in my pocket – here, here’s a hundred yuan, don’t spend it all at once-”

“No, no, Yuheng, you’re spoiling him, a hundred yuan is too much, you’re spoiling him-”

“No, no, I absolutely insist-”

“All right, all right, stop, stop!” Xue Meng shouted over them and the laughter of Mo Ran and his mother, face bright red. “I get it, I’m sorry, I should never have brought it up.”

“No, my love, you shouldn’t – don’t be so rude! What have I told you about reading those awful lists? Aiya…” Wang Chuqing gave him a tender smile. “You can go and fetch the next bottle as an apology, go on.”

“That’s an excellent apology,” Chu Wanning said. His eyes were twinkling. “But business class really was something. I wish I’d been in a better frame of mind, to enjoy it. Hua Binan and I went to a conference in Harbin on the high-speed trains – the conference was concerning high speed trains, I mean, but we travelled there on them as well – in your first year, do you remember?”

“I do – I’ve never been so cold in my life. Minus ten Celsius, every single day.”

“I caught the most atrocious cold. I gave my talk, but I took so much cough syrup beforehand I could see trains circling the audience…”

Mo Ran laughed with the others, but inside he was furious. Minus ten? Minus ten?! What kind of student was Hua Binan, to let Chu Wanning go out in minus ten degrees? Didn’t he know about his constitution? And he supposed to be interested in medicine, for fuck’s sake! He should have kept him locked in his hotel room.

Xue Meng came back in with the next bottle of Pear Blossom White just as Chu Wanning was finishing his precis of the paper.

“I have no idea what the questions were, or how I answered them.”

“You were brilliant,” Hua Binan said with a lovely smile. “Don’t worry, only I could tell. You did go on a little bit about the Wenzhou disaster, but the chair cut you off.”

“What was the food like?” Mo Ran said.

Xue Meng snorted. “Typical dog.”

“Meng’er!”

“There was a lot of sausage,” Chu Wanning said with a straight face. “A *lot* of sausage.”

“Aubergine,” Hua Binan added, making a face.

“Stew – some of the stew was very good, though.”

“Not with that bread they served it with – massive, massive, dense loaves, two kilograms. What was it called again?”

“Khleb. Just the Russian for ‘bread’. But there was also excellent vodka, and candied haws that were sold everywhere. They were delicious,” Chu Wanning said, and Mo Ran felt such a warm wave of affection for him. Of course he’d like the sweets.

“Speaking of sweet things, could I have a hand in the kitchen?” Wang Chuqing asked; Hua Binan volunteered, and he left with her and Xue Zhengyong.

“Xue Meng, silliness aside,” Chu Wanning said, his voice low and soft, “what was that about?”

Xue Meng chewed the inside of his cheek, and shot Mo Ran a poisonous glare before answering. “You do know that if I’d been here, I’d have driven to pick you up too? Dad would never have even needed to ring Mo Ran, I’d have been in the car already.”

“That’s very kind.”

“It’s not *kind*, I’d have done it!” Xue Meng said. “If I’d been *here* instead of in fucking Baidicheng, I’d have driven you – from the train, and from the police station. I could have

dug everyone out in Yuliang too, or I'd have– I'd have called a digger from the other side, from Wuchang. We could have paid them."

"It would have been impolite. We were fine." Chu Wanning was studying his face. "And I was fine in Ya'an as well."

Xue Meng shook his head, mouth twisting. "If you'd had a better lawyer, it wouldn't have taken them two days to release you."

"Ah…" Chu Wanning sighed. "You mean, if your father knew 'better' lawyers, because he was richer?"

Xue Meng blushed.

"It doesn't work like that," Chu Wanning said kindly. "The lawyer who can charge so much more than Mr. Zhu charges, who wants to work for those billionaires on that list – why would a lawyer like that take on a case like me? Why would someone who's that ambitious go into human rights law? Having more money wouldn't have got me out one second sooner. On the contrary, the richer you are, the more of a threat you are, and the more attention they'll pay you."

He smiled; it was an understanding, gentle thing. "As for your father, he's put most of his fortune into Sisheng and Wuchang. Especially after the earthquake. If he hadn't done that, if he'd been more like Jiang Xi, well, he might not quite be on that list of yours. But I like the Xue Zhengyong we have, not the hypothetical Xue Zhengyong on that list."

Then Chu Wanning did something extraordinary. He got up from his chair, and went around to Xue Meng's. "Come on."

Xue Meng looked up at him. "What?"

Chu Wanning smiled, but it was a fragile thing; he was regretting his decision. Mo Ran could only watch in stupefied amazement as, for the first time, he witnessed Chu Wanning, with excruciating awkwardness, hold out his arms for a hug.

Xue Meng didn't need any further encouragement; he was up so fast he nearly knocked Chu Wanning over, clinging to him as his easy tears came instantaneously.

He clung to Chu Wanning and buried his wet face in his shoulder. "I missed you so much!"

"Ah-a, lower, lower, not so tight," Chu Wanning said, with a blanch of pain, but Xue Meng made a horrified noise and lowered his arms, and he relaxed infinitesimally. "There, that's better. I missed you too."

"I was worried, and you've been away for so long, and the last time I saw you you were so ill, and I didn't know what to *say* or what to *do* when you came in, and then- then-"

"*Xu, xu,* it's all right. I understand."

"I- I'm through to the International Robotics Finals…"

"Really? That's… that's amazing," Chu Wanning said, glancing helplessly over Xue Meng's shoulder; Mo Ran gave him a nod and a thumbs-up.

"And I would have driven you! It's not just Mo Ran, I'd have driven you too! I'd have driven faster, so you wouldn't have even got trapped in that stupid village!"

"If you'd driven faster then you'd have been unsafe," Chu Wanning replied. "It's all all right. I'm fine, Xue Meng. There's no need to worry. Look, don't I look better than the last time you saw me?"

"Uh-huh!"

“Exactly. Come on, you and Mo Ran swap seats, sit next to me for pudding, tell me all about the Finals. Where will they be held?”

Xue Meng sniffled and reluctantly disengaged. Chu Wanning was looking surprised, blinking at Xue Meng with something like confusion on his face, but he rallied, and Mo Ran swapped seats without a word.

A year ago, he’d have felt blindingly jealous. He’d have wanted to snap his teeth at Xue Meng – the spoilt fucking *brat*, going on about how rich he wasn’t and crying until Chu Wanning turned all his attention on him. But he didn’t.

He didn’t quite know why. Perhaps it was the knowledge that he and Chu Wanning had endured so much together recently. How could one hug compare to sleeping in each other’s arms – not once, but twice?

That delicate thing between them was so precious. And what he was going to do would either strengthen and transform it, or crush it completely.

A drop of sweat rolled down his back. For the tenth time that night, he was tempted to put it off. But then he remembered waking up to his uncle’s phone call and the knowledge that Chu Wanning had been arrested, and he marshalled his courage again.

They opened another bottle of baijiu. Xue Meng was now red in the face but manfully staying awake as the cake was brought out and placed in front of Chu Wanning. They sang ‘Happy Birthday’, with varying levels of audible success, and then Chu Wanning paused, looking at the cake with confusion.

“What do I do…?”

“You have to blow them out now!” Xue Meng shouted.

Chu Wanning looked flustered. “Did no one learn anything from COVID? I’m not going to spray saliva over something we’re about to eat.”

“Yuheng, you’re meant to *blow*, not spit!”

Mo Ran snorted; Wang Chuqing slapped his arm.

“Fine, I’m not going to *forcefully exhale* over it.”

Xue Zhengyong slowly started to smile. “You need something to fan them out instead?”

“No.”

“You need a fan.”

“No!”

“I’ll go and fetch a fan,” Xue Zhengyong said, standing up.

“Xue Meng, stop him!”

“Go for his legs!”

Xue Zhengyong evaded his son and nephew with a youth’s nimbleness and dove at one of the cabinets. “Yuheng needs a fan for his birthday candles! Get off!”

“What’s…?” Hua Binan asked.

“You’ll see,” Wang Chuqing said with a sigh.

The fan was found. It was carried with great ceremony to the table, Xue Meng and Mo Ran slinking back in performative failure.

Chu Wanning knew his part in the double act well; he received the fan with solemnity and regret, like the Emperor receiving the sword of a disgraced general. He snapped it open with perfect elegance and grace, fluttered it twice, and turned so that Hua Binan could read what was written on it.

Xue is beautiful.

Hua Binan looked helplessly at Xue Zhengyong. “I don’t-”

Chu Wanning held up a hand in a gesture to wait.

He turned the fan.

Everyone else is ugly.

Xue Meng, Xue Zhengyong and Mo Ran fell about shrieking; Chu Wanning and Wang Chuqing were laughing.

Hua Binan looked utterly befuddled. “But why…?”

“He’s had that awful thing since before we met,” Wang Chuqing said amidst her laughter.

“Me and my brother- me- ahahahaha!” Xue Zhengyong gave up the attempt.

“You do realise you’ve just handed me The Fan and I have a host of candles right here?” Chu Wanning warned him with a grin, and Xue Zhengyong lunged for it. “I won’t, I won’t, don’t worry!” He fanned out the candles and handed it back.

In the semi-darkness, wreathed in curling silver smoke, Chu Wanning was beaming. Mo Ran had never seen him smile like that before, with absolutely no self-consciousness, laughing and joking, no anxiety creasing his brow.

It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life.

Wanning was beautiful. Everyone else was ugly.

He wasn’t just in love. He was *so* in love.

In his breast pocket, his birthday present for Chu Wanning felt like a lead weight over his heart.

The thought of presents must have been in Xue Zhengyong’s head as well, because he handed Chu Wanning an envelope. “This is from wifey and me. I’m going to be rude and direct and I’ll tell you right out, because otherwise you’re going to bring it back tomorrow and say you can’t accept it. I know that you’ve always wanted to go back to Hangzhou. So, in that envelope is a voucher for two weeks at the Four Seasons on West Lake.”

Chu Wanning went white. “Zhengyong, that’s- I *can’t*-"

“You can. You must let me do something for my best friend on his return. After everything we’ve all been through this year.”

“You’ve already done so much for me. A position, a job – health insurance, the hospital in Ya’an-”

“You saved my nephew’s life. And as for your position, aiya, if the government hadn’t given you such trouble, we know you’d be in Tsinghua or Peking, or even Cambridge or MIT or back in Oxford. I feel sometimes that I took advantage of the situation to nab you for Sisheng instead. No, for leaving that clinic, I knew I wanted to give you something purely for you.”

Chu Wanning’s anxiety was plainly visible on his face. “It’s too much, I just *can’t*-”

“I was happy to pay for the clinic for you, wasn’t I? I’ve given plenty more to people I don’t know, and it makes me happy to be able to give this to my friend. I might not be the richest man in China,” he said, and tousled the now-sleeping Xue Meng’s hair, “but this I can do easily. You still have to pay for the flights, don’t worry! But I know how much you’ve wanted to go, for so long, and you’ve always put it off. So, no longer, do you hear? Go to Hangzhou. I know there’s going to be a lot of painful things to face there, so you might as well have a nice room to come back to at the end of the day!”

“I can’t accept it.”

“It’s in your name, it’s good for three years, and it’s completely non-refundable,” Xue Zhengyong said proudly. “So if you don’t use it, it’ll just go to waste.”

Chu Wanning bowed his head in defeat. “Thank you. Zhengyong, Chuqing, thank you.”

“It’s our very great pleasure,” Wang Chuqing said. “Meng’er has a present for your return as well, but I think that will have to wait until tomorrow. You’ll all stay the night with us, there’s more than enough rooms, and then I can make sure you have some breakfast in the morning.”

After some polite demurements they agreed to this. Wang Chuqing offered to show Hua Binan to his room; he said that he would follow them up in a few moments, and so the Xues helped their muttering son up the stairs.

Hua Binan smiled warmly at Mo Ran; Mo Ran, remembering his conversation with Chu Wanning in that service station, smiled back. The fucker wanted him to leave, but Mo Ran wasn't above being obliviously rude when he wanted to be.

Something just felt… off. Something about Hua Binan was familiar, but it didn't feel like just the hospital…

Hua Binan turned his beautiful smile to Chu Wanning, and held out a small, wrapped present. "Here. I need to explain mine as well…"

"Ah, Hua Binan, you didn't need to…"

"I know, I know, but please – to celebrate your return. But it might be something that helps in that."

Chu Wanning reluctantly unwrapped the gift. It was a bottle of small pills.

"It's a new drug I've developed myself. It uses a chemical found in the brains of tapirs, so I call it Tapir Dew."

Mo Ran flushed bright red; he felt dizzy. Hua Binan was giving Chu Wanning a drug called Mò Dew? It was his name – his own name…!

He felt hot, and then freezing cold. A drug called Mò Dew?

Hua Binan laughed. "Oh, I just realised! Ha, I didn't extract chemicals from the brain of your student, Chu-*laoshi*, but of course. Mò Ran. But your name is *mò* as in what you write with, yes? I saw it on your chart in the hospital. This is from the animal that lives in the jungle – *mò* as in the genus *Tapirus*. How funny."

Chu Wanning was holding the bottle like it might explode. "But what is it?"

“It helps you to sleep. In the human trials everyone in a hundred-strong control group fell asleep within just seven minutes, and even better: Every single one reported no dreams whatsoever, every night they took it. Obviously, it’s not for everyday use, but if you need it, it’ll help you to get some rest.”

Chu Wanning was looking at Hua Binan in consternation. “Is it legal?”

“Of course! It’s just not for sale yet – there’s always so much rigmarole with branding and patenting – as you well know! – but it’s in production now.”

“At Guyueye.” Chu Wanning shook his head.

Hua Binan’s smile faltered a little; he looked confused. “I thought you’d softened towards Guyueye?”

“Why would you think that?” Chu Wanning said, equally confused.

“Well, because you were part of their scar-minimisation trial.”

Mo Ran looked at Chu Wanning. He was as white as lightning. Mo Ran hadn’t seen a proper Chu Wanning explosion in a long time, but it suddenly looked very possible.

“How do you know about that?”

“The clinical trials were meant to be in Beijing, but I spoke to the team and said that they’d get a wider range of cases in the non-military clinics in Shanghai. I wanted to help.” Hua Binan was smiling so proudly. “It worked, right? More than twice the progress at the three-month point, and it’ll probably be even better at six months.”

Something viscerally recoiled in Mo Ran. Chu Wanning had told him about the scar treatment on one of the nights in Yuliang, when he was applying the silicon sheets. Some new combination of steroid injections and topical gels.

Chu Wanning stood up. He was trembling with rage. “I denied permission for my data to be used.”

“And it’s not been! But it was still sent to Guyueye. I only read enough to see that you’d received the treatments, I didn’t read any further.” Hua Binan looked distraught. “I’m so sorry, I just wanted to help, and when I saw that you’d taken the treatment, I thought that maybe you didn’t mind Guyueye as much anymore…”

His jaw was clenched. “I refused the treatment. But then the doctors there said that if I was going to boycott Guyueye, I would have to leave the clinic, because every drug, every piece of surgical equipment, every plaster and latex glove in China has been made or designed by Guyueye in some way. So I agreed to it, but didn’t give my permission for my data to be used in any publication.”

“And it hasn’t been! I just saw it because I was linked to the team that designed it.” Hua Binan shook his head. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know it would upset you; I just knew how amazing the treatment was and wanted you to benefit.”

“I should never have taken it.”

“Of course you should,” Mo Ran said. “Your doctors were right. Your suffering doesn’t help in any cause against Guyueye. It would just be suffering for no reason.”

Hua Binan nodded to him in gratitude. “Exactly. And because you didn’t give your consent for the data to be used, your taking it doesn’t benefit Guyueye either. But it helped, didn’t it?”

Chu Wanning was saved from answering by Wang Chuqing. “I was just coming down to show Hua Binan to his room.”

Hua Binan stood up. “Thank you. … I’m sorry again, Chu-*laoshi*. I only wanted to help…”

Chu Wanning nodded tightly. “I know. Thank you, for that. But in future… You can’t look at my medical records, Hua Binan. That’s not- It’s not acceptable.”

“I know, I know – I swear, I stopped reading as soon as I knew who it belonged to.” Hua Binan looked so hurt. “I’ll… I’ll see you in the morning. I’m glad that you’re recovering.”

Chu Wanning nodded again. He watched Hua Binan and Wang Chuqing climb the steps, gripping his arms tightly.

Mo Ran had disliked Hua Binan before. Now he loathed him. He touched Chu Wanning’s arm, but wasn’t surprised when it was violently shaken off.

He picked up the bottle of pills instead. “I’ll clean this and get rid of them.”

Chu Wanning nodded.

“Come on.” He pocketed the pills and picked up the bottle of baijiu. “Let’s go in the garden. It’s a nice night.”

Chu Wanning followed him wordlessly. He was still visibly uncomfortable. Mo Ran could feel the tension radiating from him.

The Xues’ garden was huge and incredibly beautiful, tended to expertly by Wang Chuqing. It didn’t just look beautiful either; the herbs and spices and abundance of fruit trees scented the warm summer air.

Mo Ran passed the bottle. “Here.”

Chu Wanning drank from it and exhaled. He chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment. “Do you think less of me?”

Mo Ran blinked. “For… for the scar treatment?”

“Mn.”

“No! I’d have thought less of you if you didn’t take it. Putting your pride ahead of your health. I’m so glad you took it.”

Chu Wanning stared resolutely ahead, refusing Mo Ran’s bid for eye contact. “So you don’t think I’m a hypocrite?”

“Of course not. Like your doctors said, Guyueye have the entire health industry sewn up. It’s a monopoly. I don’t think you’re a hypocrite for paying taxes while criticising the government either, do I?”

Chu Wanning didn’t answer, but he looked down at the path.

“I think… sometimes I think you’re *too* good,” Mo Ran said. “Too good for your own good. I wish you’d be a bit more selfish sometimes, protect yourself more, but then you wouldn’t be you.”

It was working, slowly. Chu Wanning exhaled again, but it was more of a sigh this time. “I wish he hadn’t done that,” he admitted softly. “Not just the treatment. But…. It was good. It was a good night.”

“It still is,” Mo Ran tried. “There’s still the moon. There’s still wine in this bottle. Ignore him.”

It was the wrong thing to say; Chu Wanning tensed again. “You don’t think that what he did…?”

“No! No, I think it was *fucked up*.” Chu Wanning finally looked at him. “Seriously fucked up! Interfering with your treatment, reading your medical report – no. Shizun. When I said to ignore him, I didn’t mean to minimise it. I just don’t want it to ruin your whole night. Think about it tomorrow instead. Be angry about it tomorrow.”

“I know that I’m too sensitive about things. Unimportant or insignificant things.”

“Who told you that?” Mo Ran said sternly. “I don’t think you are. Fuck, you should be *more* upset about things! What Hua Binan did, the way the police treated you… They’re not unimportant or insignificant. *You’re* not unimportant or insignificant.”

“I never said I was,” Chu Wanning said, aiming for haughtiness. But he finally gave Mo Ran the ghost of a smile.

Mo Ran led them to his favourite spot. The garden was large enough that a foundation had been built to support it where the mountainside sloped away. There were steps up to the top of the wall, and a small pavilion to mark the corner. Below it was a hundred-foot drop, and the Wuchang Valley spread below them. Stars glittered in the black velvet sky, mirrored by the lights of the town below, and the Dadu River shone like silver in the moonlight.

Here the light of the house didn’t reach them; it was like they were flying above the valley, completely alone.

“I haven’t given you your present,” Mo Ran said, after a minute of silence. “I don’t think it can compare to my uncle’s, but I have to thank Hua Binan for making sure mine’s better than his, at least.”

Chu Wanning swatted him. “Don’t be unkind.”

“I’m not! I’ve very grateful to him.”

Chu Wanning rolled his eyes, but he was smiling.

“What even *is* a tapir anyway?”

“One’s sitting right next to me,” Chu Wanning said, his smile deepening.

“No, really? Is it a kind of monkey?”

“No – it’s like a pig. It’s black and white, and it’s got a…” Chu Wanning curved his hand over his face. “A nose. A curly nose.” He shook his head. “And it’s endangered! What was Hua Binan *thinking*? Even if he’s synthesised whatever chemical’s in those pills, he must have started with one… I can’t believe it of him. I don’t know. He’s completely forgotten all his scruples, trying to curry favour in Guyueye…”

“I told you, don’t think about Guyueye.” Mo Ran brought his present from his pocket. “Here.”

Chu Wanning took it. “You… you’re giving me a *handkerchief*?”

Mo Ran’s nerves were getting the better of him, but this at least he was happy about. “I found embroidery threads in your flat when I was tidying, and I realised that your handkerchief with the haitang flowers on it was destroyed, so… I learnt embroidery. Or at least, that one design. This one is the third one I embroidered though, the other two had blood on them, they were very messy…”

Chu Wanning was staring at him; his mouth was open in shock. “But… It’s…”

He looked upset. *Really* upset.

“What is it?”

Chu Wanning looked down at the handkerchief in his trembling hands. “You’re… Are you going somewhere? Are you- why would you do it like this? Why would- You… Do you not want to be friends?”

Mo Ran blinked in confusion. “What?”

“A handkerchief. It’s the symbol of parting forever…” Chu Wanning’s face was white in the moonlight; he had closed his eyes, and his long eyelashes fluttered. “Are you… Mo Ran, I don’t understand, did I do something?”

“No! Shit, no! No, I thought- I just thought, you lost your handkerchief, and I couldn’t find one online with your haitang flowers, so I made it myself – I didn’t know! I knew about clocks and cut flowers and scissors, but I didn’t- I didn’t know!”

How could this have gone so disastrously? Was it doomed from the start? Was this a sign?

“It’s actually just the wrapping,” he said. “The real present is in the wrapping. Give it back to me after, it’s not the present. I’d never give you a handkerchief.”

“You didn’t know?”

“Shizun, I… I’m just a street dog, remember? I didn’t know about any of those gift taboos until I came here. I would *never*… I would never.”

Chu Wanning’s breath was slowing. He was holding a hand over his heart. “I thought…”

“*No*,” Mo Ran said, and took his hand. Chu Wanning must have been relieved, because he didn’t try to pull it free. “I promise. Never. But I…”

He looked into Chu Wanning’s. Large, black phoenix eyes – they reflected the moonlight, and Mo Ran was seized by the urge to throw away all caution, all stupid embroidered handkerchiefs and symbols and words. He was too stupid for any of that. He should just kiss Chu Wanning, let him *know* how he felt in the best way Mo Ran could explain.

But the remnants of bewildered fear were still sketched on Chu Wanning’s face, and he knew now that however brave he was in the face of death threats and bombs and police intimidation, when it came to feelings or people he was unsure, unconfident, full of anxiety and doubt. It filled him with a great welling protectiveness; he wanted to hold the man in front of him, to protect him from the world that failed to understand and cherish him.

“I’ll get you another present,” he promised. “I’ll take the handkerchief back. It’s just wrapping. I’d never, never give you a handkerchief, I didn’t know. I… I actually bought you a mug. That gold one, they weren’t selling it anymore, but I asked where they sourced it and I went to the manufacturers. But that was just a present because I promised I’d replace it, not for tonight. Tonight, I… I wanted to say something to you. And I wanted you to be able to hold the words, and carry them with you if you wanted, so…”

Mo Ran took the handkerchief back from Chu Wanning and laid it out on his lap.

He opened it once, and then again, never letting go of Chu Wanning’s hand, and he revealed the piece of paper it contained, folded into a five-petaled blossom.

Chapter 41: Confiteor

Once, when he had been five years old and named Chang Wanning, Chang Junde had deliberately broken his steam train.

Chang Wanning had a floating heart and a short temper, and had not so much ignored all factors of relative size and age as never considered them in the first place; he had leapt on Chang Junde like a cat, clawing and biting and screeching. Chang Wanning rarely spoke, but he could *scream*; it was the sound of a forge, transforming his pain and hurt and fury into pure decibels.

Chang Junde had taken over the shrieking; Chang Wanning was biting his nose with all the strength in his jaw, holding back nothing, and was growling instead. Two other boys pulled him off, tearing Chang Junde's nostril open, as Chang Wanning's clawed hand scratched his cheek and cornea both.

The only thing that had cut through his blind rage was one of the older boys' feet, brought down right in his solar plexus. His nerves turned the pain into ice, all over his body; all the air in his lungs had been forced up into his head, turning the world into a white-grey fog. When he came to a few seconds later he was drenched in sweat, stunned and breathless.

That was how Chu Wanning felt when he saw the folded flower. The sight of it was like that kick to the solar plexus.

Mo Ran had seen the note. He had seen it, and knew that Chu Wanning had kept it.

And he knew what it was, what it said. Who had written it. Chu Wanning was certain of that. Or he would have left it out, with the charger and the headphones, instead of lying and denying all knowledge of it.

No. Mo Ran had seen, and Mo Ran knew.

Doom was inexorable; the end of the Kalpa was at hand.

“Open it,” Mo Ran said encouragingly, a million miles away.

The white fog. The cold sweat. The nausea and the dizziness.

“No.”

Mo Ran faltered. “No?”

Chu Wanning jerked his head from side to side; the world continued to spin.

What did the note say?

“*I know what you are*”?

“*The police are on their way*”?

Were the Xues gathered around in the bushes, ready to drop the act and denounce him as a pervert? A disgusting, depraved pervert who kept rags and notes, like a stalker with a pinboard of scraps.

He briefly considered lying, that he had just folded the note in boredom and forgotten it in his bag, and then decided against it. Mo Ran had clearly seen the truth of the situation, given the dramatic revelation of it back to him. Besides, Chu Wanning found it difficult to lie, outside of a handful – “*I’m fine*”, “*It doesn’t hurt*”, “*I don’t want anything*” – that had become so automatic, so habitual, that they no longer registered as lies at all.

No. Mo Ran knew. As to why he had chosen Chu Wanning's birthday to confront him over it… Did he need his family around him? Did he want them to witness the moment of accusation? … by heaven, was he scared, to talk to Chu Wanning alone?

"Are they going to jump out?" he asked. Earlier, he'd been worried that they would jump out to surprise him for his birthday. Now he realised what he should have really been worried about.

"What?"

"They don't need to jump out," Chu Wanning said. "I'll go. I'm sorry."

"What… Shizun, I don't understand what you mean."

Why had Mo Ran brought him to the mountainside ledge? Was he expected to throw himself from it in shame?

"I never meant for you to find out," he said. He squeezed his eyes shut to stop the tears from falling; he didn't want to manipulate Mo Ran any more than he already had.

"Shizun… Wanning. Please just open it. Read it."

"They don't need to jump out. I'll tell them – are they- are they here? Are they going to jump out?"

"Wanning… Look at me. Please look at me."

Eyes closed, he shook his head again. He'd lost everything – his only friends, his job, his dignity, his reputation. He wouldn't lose this final thread of his pride too.

“Tell me what you mean. What you’re thinking. Please. I want to understand.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Chu Wanning whispered. “I tried not to. And when I couldn’t stop, I promised that I’d never let you find out, and I’m sorry I broke that promise, I’m so sorry that you found that note – I’ll leave, of course, you never have to see me again-”

“Wanning, *please*! It says ‘I love you’.”

Chu Wanning’s eyes stretched open, and the unleashed tears fell. “What- I. What?”

Mo Ran’s face was agonisingly close to his own. “I found that note, and I thought that you’d kept it because… Maybe because. You liked me. And I *love* you. But I thought that if you liked me a bit, maybe you wouldn’t mind if I told – maybe you wouldn’t be angry. If I told you… Look.”

He unfolded the paper, nearly tearing it in his haste.

I love you.

Chu Wanning felt sick.

“Is this a joke?” he croaked.

“No! Why would- Why would it be a joke?”

The paper swam; Mo Ran’s spidery handwriting shifted and danced. “It’s impossible,” Chu Wanning said. He didn’t understand. He *couldn’t* understand.

“Impossible that I could love you? You,” Mo Ran said. “You, the best man in the world?”

“Don’t!” Chu Wanning shouted. “Don’t be cruel!”

“I’m not- I don’t understand!” Mo Ran’s own voice was cracking; with visible effort, he pulled himself under control, but he still looked like a kicked dog, eyes huge and dark. “Help me. Help me to understand.”

Then Mo Ran took his hand. Chu Wanning tried to pull it free, but Mo Ran gripped it tightly, lacing their fingers together. “Help me. Why is it impossible?”

“Because…” With his free hand he gestured to himself. “Everything.”

“Indulge me. Why, exactly?”

“I’m bad-tempered. Strict.”

“I think you’re the kindest man I’ve ever met.”

It broke Chu Wanning’s heart. The world had been so cruel to Mo Ran that he thought *Chu Wanning*, with all his criticisms and irritations, was kind? He felt so angry, that the world had so warped his perception.

“I’m not. I’m strict and critical and unfriendly. Bitter and washed-up…”

“You care about people so much. You’re compassionate and sweet and gentle.” He grinned. “Most of the time. I was an idiot and didn’t think so for a time, but cleverer people than me always knew it. My uncle. Luo Xianxian… Even Mengmeng, and think of how much I hate to admit that.”

The air was thick with heat and moisture. Chu Wanning felt as though his blood was boiling. His heartbeats were coming like raindrops in a storm, combining into the hum of bees and hornets in his ears.

"I'm boring. I can't- I can't talk."

"You can when someone's listening properly. And you're so interesting. You know so much, about so many things. You're hilarious."

The fog swirled around him; the bench beneath them as bobbing as though they were on the sea; the earth beneath their feet was shifting sickeningly. "I'm so old," Chu Wanning said desperately.

This apparently shocked a laugh out of Mo Ran. "You're *thirty*. And you look younger than me. Honestly. My uncle's, what, fifteen years older than my aunt, and look at them. A few years is nothing."

Chu Wanning felt as though they were sparring, as though he was putting every iota of effort he had into his strikes and Mo Ran was just batting each blow away effortlessly. He pulled the final one out of his heart, out of his gut, deep and painful and clawing up his throat as he tried to spit it out.

"I'm so ugly…" he finally said, anxious. Helpless.

"*What?*"

He tried to pull his hand free again, but Mo Ran didn't let him; instead he raised his other to rub angrily at his face. His breath shuddered out, and his sternum ached with the effort of not falling into sobs, his jaw with the effort of keeping his expression as still as possible.

Mo Ran's jaw was slack. He opened and closed his mouth idiotically, looking like a fish in the tank of a seafood restaurant.

“Let me go.”

“What did you just say?”

“Let me go!”

“Not until you tell me what you just said.”

“I’m ugly, Mo Ran! Everyone knows it, everyone says it, and then for someone like *you* to- You’re so handsome, so attractive, so good-looking, and then *I’m*- It’s *cruel*. It’s cruel! Why are you doing this to me?”

He tried to wrench his hand free again; he knew what he must look like now, face twisted and blotchy with emotion, strands of hair disgustingly stuck to his forehead with sweat. He dashed the tears from his eyes again, and then saw them mirrored in Mo Ran’s eyes.

“Wanning…” he said softly. “You think you’re *ugly*?”

“I’m not *deaf*. I've heard what people say about me. Spider hands. A mouth like a cat’s- I can’t even say it, it’s disgusting. Students… Students in Sisheng call me…”

The words were lodged in his throat like fishing hooks. He felt overwhelmed with shame, for Mo Ran to hear them – for him to see Chu Wanning’s vanity and unmanly sensitivity, for it to have upset him so much.

“I’ve heard some students call me... Sexless. The Sexless Savant. Because no one would want to have sex with me.” He felt the acid of bile in the back of his throat. “I shouldn’t have said that. It’s inappropriate-”

“*No*,” Mo Ran said. He looked absolutely devastated. “No. I… I’ve heard them say that too. But it doesn’t mean- They mean it in that everyone wants to, but you’d never… That you’re so pure. That you’re out of everyone’s league.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. He stared aggressively at the note in his lap; it mocked him with the words that had never been addressed to him. “No. No one’s ever… No one. No one’s ever liked me.”

“But… I can’t believe this. You’re the most… You might not be deaf, but are you *blind*?! Shizun!” Mo Ran used his other hand to try to move Chu Wanning’s chin; he turned his face away. “You- What about that girl who put the camera in the shower?”

“That was for you! You, Shi Mingjing, Xue Meng. That’s why I argued for her expulsion. I had to protect you.”

“What about that agent who came up to us in the street? Do you remember? When he asked if you’d ever modelled?”

“He was making fun of me – that’s why I said it was wrong, it was wrong to mock someone just for walking in the street-”

“He wanted-!” Mo Ran’s voice rose and Chu Wanning flinched at it. Mo Ran squeezed his hand in apology. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I didn’t… I had no idea. Is that why you didn’t want me to take your photograph? At the landslide site?”

“You were joking about it being a present for the girls.”

“I was, but- But because they all fancy you so much!”

“You said I’d look better if I smiled.”

“Only because you were looking so stiff - I didn’t know!”

Chu Wanning could barely breathe. “Stop it, please, *stop it*-”

“I thought that you were so used to everyone saying how good-looking you are that it must have been annoying for you!”

“No one’s ever said it!” Chu Wanning finally stood up, letting the note fall to the ground; Mo Ran might not let go of his hand, but he could pull harder if he was standing.

“No, no, no, please, please, Wanning. Please. Please just sit for a moment. I can explain.”

Chu Wanning turned his face away, so that Mo Ran couldn’t see the treacherous trembling of his chin.

“Some people are just so… *supernaturally* good-looking, that other people don’t… They don’t think they have a chance with them. Only idiots and assholes think it’s worth a shot. I’m an idiot, so I’m… But you’re not just good-looking. You’re not just handsome. You’re stunning. You’re *insanely* beautiful. You could be in films, you could be in adverts, that modelling agent thought that he’d just made his fortune when he spotted you. You look like you should be living on Mount Fucking Penglai. And people find that intimidating. It’d be bad enough if you were *just* beautiful, but you’re a fucking *genius* as well. No one thinks they could possibly be good enough for you. I *know* I’m not, but I’m enough of a fool to say to you…”

Chu Wanning finally looked back at Mo Ran. “What are you *talking* about? Look at you! You’re the most- You’re tall and handsome, and your *smile*- Everyone loves you. Everyone-”

Mo Ran just smiled at him and tugged his hand. “Please sit down with me. Please?”

He wanted to *run*. Against his better judgement he sat instead, and nearly jumped out of his skin when Mo Ran touched his back.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t!”

“Okay.” Mo Ran obeyed, but kept a hold of his hand. “I wanted… I thought that this might freak you out a bit. I realised that I was in love with you in Yuliang, and then when I found that note, I thought *maybe* you might… Well. Like me. But I knew that if you did, you’d be worried about it, because I used to be your student- No, no, don’t get up, ‘used to’, ‘used to’! And literally ‘used to’ partially because I wanted to spend more time with you without you worrying about it.”

“It was wrong,” Chu Wanning whispered. “I never wanted you to find out…”

“I never had a clue. And feelings aren’t wrong. You were never anything but responsible and respectful… Please. *I’ve* not been… When you fell asleep on me in Yuliang, I stayed awake for two hours. Because I was so happy.”

That was the night that Chu Wanning had been so angry at himself for his plan to stay awake and watch Mo Ran sleep… and Mo Ran had done it to him? When they were sharing that bed, Mo Ran had also been…?

You haven’t done anything wrong. Nothing unwelcome or inappropriate or upsetting. You’ve done nothing *wrong.*

Seeing that Chu Wanning wasn’t going to immediately make another run for it, Mo Ran continued. “I really wanted to do this properly. To take it slow, so that you wouldn’t be scared-”

“I’m not scared!”

“No, no, I know. But… I didn’t know if you had ever been with a guy before…”

Chu Wanning blushed to the roots of his hair. He’d never been with *anyone* before.

“And obviously there’s other things to worry about – the police, the press, my family-”

“Oh, god!”

“No, no, I haven’t told them! I haven’t told anyone. How I feel about you. I’m just saying, it’s a lot. It’d be a lot even if we were just two guys who met and…”

“I’m not,” Chu Wanning said. How many times did he have to make this exact denial. “I’m not, you know. Gay. I’m not anything.”

“Not anything? So you don’t…?”

Chu Wanning made a strangled noise of discomfort. “I never looked at... Thought about. Until you. Until… About your third year. Oh, I shouldn't have- *Please*, I should never, it was-”

He was going to be sick. He was going to pass out. He was going to do both, and if he didn't, he was going to take a swan-dive off the garden wall.

Mo Ran looked stunned. “My third year? But that’s… More than two years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” was all Chu Wanning could say. He was no good with words, but if he were Du Fu himself, he wouldn't have been able to articulate his shame and his guilt.

“No! I mean… I didn’t *know.* I’d never have known, without Yuliang, without everything. But it’s not… Wow. Oh, *Wanning*…”

There was something new in Mo Ran’s voice; something soft and despicable. “Don’t pity me.”

“I don’t! I don’t, but… I was such a dick to you. I’ve… I’ve been so horrible to you.”

“No. You had a difficult time.”

It was Mo Ran’s turn to shake his head. “I wanted to be slow and respectful, but then when… When my uncle said you’d been arrested and taken to Ya’an, I just went mad. I couldn’t eat. Couldn’t sleep. I felt like I couldn’t *breathe*. And if they took you somewhere and I couldn’t see you for months again, I thought I… I couldn’t bear it. So I’m being selfish. I *know* I’m being selfish. I know you deserve so much more and so much better than me, but like I said, only an idiot or an asshole could even dream they might have a chance with you, and I reckon I’m both.”

A chance with you. What did that *mean*? What did a chance mean for them? Disgrace. Ostracism.

And then, after all that. After Chu Wanning had nothing left, Mo Ran would realise what he was really like – would grow bored of him, would find someone good-looking and fun and affectionate and *normal*.

Suddenly Chu Wanning felt exhausted; so tired, so anxious, and so hurt. He felt… He felt like he had when Huaizui had stabbed him, and he lay bleeding out on the kitchen floor. The same ache in his chest, all the wind knocked out of his lungs – the same seeping exhaustion. The same utter and complete disbelief.

He stood up again, swaying on his feet. Mo Ran held onto his hand.

“Do I? Do I have a chance?”

Chu Wanning couldn’t answer. His words had finally vanished, all at once. He had already said too much, spewed filthy truths everywhere. Mo Ran had mercilessly reached inside his armour and torn confessions about the past and the present from him. Would he now insist on skinning him too?

The hornets were buzzing in his ears again; the sound of them mingled with the rising screech of the cicadas. The moon shimmered, and the highlights of silver-grey in the shadows around them began to coruscate in nauseating stars, exploding behind his eyeballs.

“Wanning?”

Mo Ran finally let go of his hand. There was naked concern in his voice; he stood up to turn him back, to help him sit, and Chu Wanning took his chance and bolted. The plants and tree branches whipped his face and hands – his ugly, scarred face, that Mo Ran had said was *beautif-*

“No! Stop!”

The sudden change in Mo Ran’s voice made him turn his head, but his feet carried him on. He ran into the tree with such force that he bounced back from it, and as he fell backwards the blessed darkness swallowed him at last.

Chapter 42: Courage and Cowardice

Chapter Notes

> I'm sorry this chapter took so long, especially after the cliff-hanger at the end of the last chapter...! 😅 It was an absolute HELL week at work, and I rewrote this chapter three times, so I hope you enjoy it! ♥

Chu Wanning came to, head ringing like a bell. Mo Ran was crouched beside him, staring down with naked concern on his face, but behind him was a tall, pale figure. His face was twisting, and for a terrifying moment Chu Wanning thought it was Shi Mingjing – he had to *move*, he had to get up, he had to move away-

But no – Mo Ran was there, between them. Mo Ran would protect him…

And then Shi Mingjing bent over, and it wasn't Shi Mingjing at all. It was Hua Binan, and Chu Wanning's fear receded just a little.

Mo Ran smiled at him and stroked the hair away from his face. "You're all right, you're all right, easy…"

"Why were you chasing him?" Hua Binan asked from above.

"What are you doing out here? Spying?" Mo Ran rejoined sharply, and sent a spike of terror through Chu Wanning's abdomen. He pushed Mo Ran's hand away.

"I couldn't sleep. I came down for some fresh air, and I saw *you* shouting and chasing after Chu-*laoshi* – Chu-*laoshi*, are you all right? Do you need me to get him away from you?"

"You can *fucking try*-"

“No, no, I’m fine,” Chu Wanning said with a groan. He sat up, which set his head to spinning, but Mo Ran’s hand was warm and strong in the centre of his back.

Hua Binan was ignoring Mo Ran; even in the darkness, his eyes bore into Chu Wanning. “Why was he chasing you?”

“We were joking around,” Mo Ran said. “I was trying to make him have another drink.”

Hua Binan’s voice was full of disdain. “Is that true, Chu-*laoshi*?”

“Mn,” Chu Wanning said. He gingerly pressed his fingers to the centre of his forehead. “I didn’t see the tree…”

It was too much. It was all too much. For a fleeting moment, he was tempted to ask for the tapir pills back from Mo Ran; he just wanted to be *out* of this situation. Even the humiliation of having run into the tree paled in comparison next to the pain of being so overwhelmed by emotions.

“Why were you pressuring him to drink?” Hua Binan said. His voice was soft and silky, and his lovely eyes were narrowed slightly, even in the darkness of the garden.

“We were joking around.”

“Chu-*laoshi*, joking around…” Hua Binan sounded doubtful, and Chu Wanning felt another nasty jerk at his insides. The disbelief that he might have a sense of humour, that he might have inside jokes and friends… That he might be human.

“Maybe it’s only with people he feels comfortable with,” Mo Ran replied instantly.

Hua Binan blinked, the hit palpably landing, then dismissed Mo Ran with a withering look. “You might have a concussion, Chu-*laoshi*, let me help you…”

Another hand on his other shoulder, pawing at him; Chu Wanning shook it off gracelessly. “I’m *fine*. I don’t have a concussion.” He said it firmly. It was a fact. He could *not* have a concussion, because it was simply too embarrassing to consider.

Hua Binan crouched next to him as well. “Why was he pressuring you to drink?”

“I was trying to cheer him up after *you* went into his medical record-”

“Enough! Both of you, enough. I’m fine. I just want to go to bed.” He was dizzier than he had expected. It was strange, some part of him floating calmly above thought, that where Hua Binan’s touch felt both too light and too intrusive, Mo Ran’s firm, confident hold on him didn’t evoke the same visceral feeling of distaste. Perhaps it was their enforced proximity in Yuliang.

Perhaps it was just love.

Mo Ran pulled him up to his feet and guided him to where the dim lighting from the house finally illuminated the path a little. He kindly didn’t speak, and Chu Wanning was sure he’d have tried to run again if he had.

They went to the room where Chu Wanning usually slept when he stayed the night. Mo Ran bent down to take of Chu Wanning’s shoes, and Chu Wanning flapped his hand at his head in a light slap.

“I have arms!”

“I know, I know.” But he lingered in the door until Chu Wanning had taken off his shoes and socks and lain down on the bed.

“Good *night*, Mo Ran.”

“How’s your head?”

“It’s fine. I just need to sleep.”

“Okay. Um.” The light was off. Chu Wanning had rolled onto his side so that his back was to Mo Ran. He didn’t want him to see his expression. His eyes were squeezed shut – his heart was pounding, racing dangerously fast, and he thought that he was going to pass out again soon.

“Wanning… Every word I said was true. But I won’t bring it up again. We’re still friends. Nothing will change. Whatever you want to do, that’s what we’ll do. You don’t have to worry. I should have been slower. I should have been more careful. I’m sorry.”

He was merciful enough not to wait for a response; he shut the door immediately after his apology, and Chu Wanning released the painful breath he had been holding. Without foreknowledge or prediction, the exhalation turned into a sob.

*

On the other side of the door, Mo Ran heard the dam break; one harsh gasp, a shuddering sigh, and then silence. He hoped that Chu Wanning had stopped crying. He guessed he’d buried his face in his pillow to muffle it instead.

He stood for a moment with his forehead pressed to the door. He wanted to throw it open again, wanted to stride in and take Chu Wanning in his arms and stroke his hair and hold him until he fell asleep. How much easier things had been in Yuliang on that score…

But Chu Wanning wouldn't want it. Mo Ran had been too fast, had selfishly overwhelmed him on a night that he *knew* would be difficult for him. He should have reconsidered after Hua Binan. He *definitely* should have reconsidered after the handkerchief disaster. Instead, he'd blundered into his confession (the *wrong* confession), and now Chu Wanning was rounding out his birthday by crying alone, a darkening bruise in the centre of his forehead.

Chu Wanning had admitted that he liked him. Had liked him for three years. Mo Ran should have been over the moon. Instead, he felt sick with grief and guilt.

Chu Wanning had been so upset and so ashamed. *"I've heard some students call me... Sexless. The Sexless Savant. Because no one would want to have sex with me."* How could Mo Ran ever say to him that *he'd* been the one to make up that nasty nickname? He'd not only made it up to make his friends laugh, Song Quitong and her shitty set, but he'd spread it around after Chu Wanning had chewed him out in a class for forgetting his homework.

He'd made it up to soothe his own ego. After all, it hurt less knowing that he'd never have sex with Chu Wanning if Chu Wanning would never have sex with anyone.

And he thought that he was ugly! How?! It was astonishing to Mo Ran, he couldn't grasp the enormity of it. He was, quite literally, incredulous.

And then there were the drugs…

He crushed the heels of his palms to his eyes. How had he fucked it up this badly?

"Are you all right?"

Mo Ran spun around at the soft, gentle voice; Hua Binan's tall, slender silhouette stood down the corridor. Something *slammed* into his mind, something huge and ungraspable, and then Hua Binan was talking again while Mo Ran felt himself reeling.

“You’re so good with him. He let you help him all the way up. I’d never have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

Mo Ran tried to walk past him. How much had the sneaking bastard seen?

Hua Binan stopped him. “I’m sorry, I was just surprised. Shi Mingjing said that you didn’t like him.”

“Shi Mingjing says a lot of shit,” Mo Ran snarled. “He’s a green tea bitch. I wouldn’t believe a word that comes out of his mouth. To be honest, I’d say I’m sorry that you have to deal with him now, but I’m more relieved that Chu Wanning doesn’t have to, so.”

Mo Ran could hear the smile in Hua Binan’s voice. “I suppose it would be difficult for you to dislike him, after what he did for you. Maybe Shi Mingjing got the wrong end of the stick, like me.”

“He did. But it’s not just because of everything Chu Wanning’s done for me. It’s because of who he is. I’d have thought you’d have known that yourself? You were his only student for so long.”

“Oh, of course, of course.” Hua Binan’s voice was very friendly now. “But his quality is of a kind that not everyone can recognise, wouldn’t you agree?”

Mo Ran was too stupid for this. The temptation to punch Hua Binan in his perfect face was becoming overwhelming. “Goodnight,” he ground out, and trotted down the stairs.

The bench in the corner pavilion felt like a crime scene. The baijiu, handkerchief, and the note all lay untouched. Mo Ran sank onto the seat.

Chu Wanning *liked* him. Even… If he could judge from Chu Wanning’s response, his distress and his anxiety, perhaps it was even more than that. He clearly felt guilt at when his feelings

had begun, but Mo Ran dismissed that with a thought – he had never had the least inkling of it.

For Shi Mei, he'd tried to seduce Chu Wanning. To make him develop feelings for him and behave inappropriately. And all along, Chu Wanning had already had those feelings, and was determined never to show them.

It made his head hurt. It made his heart hurt.

Even… Even drugged out of his mind, about to have a seizure, manhandled by the person he liked… *still* he'd tried to protect Mo Ran. *Still,* he'd been thinking about that boundary.

How had Mo Ran's life become so twisted?

No.

How had *he* so twisted his own life?

After the private investigator had taken him to the Xues, he'd promised himself that *now* he was going to do everything right. From now on, he was going to be truthful and grateful and help people like he had been helped… And only a few years later, here he was. A liar, a manipulator, and just one small step away from a rapist.

How could he have thought that he could possibly be with someone like Chu Wanning, even if they both liked each other? How could he smear his filth on that immaculate soul?

The next time he saw Chu Wanning... He would confess. Properly. He'd tell him everything that he'd done, and he would face the consequences. Even if he went to prison for it, at least then this guilt lodged in his throat, clawing at his intestines, might be quietened.

The sun rose over the Wuchang Valley, touching the tops of the trees with gold.

He left before anyone else woke up, leaving a note apologising for missing breakfast and saying that he had plans to meet some friends.

What friends? All of his friends had vanished after the bomb, too awkward and shocked to say anything about it, and Mo Ran had been able to think of nothing else.

Having made up his mind to press the self-destruct button on his life the next time he saw Chu Wanning, he spent the following days avoiding anywhere he might be.

Two e-mails arrived, single lines asking how he was, which he ignored.

He went to the gym, working out until his muscles burned and he could no longer think for the pain, and there and back he skulked past the 7/11 and the tea shop and the pastry place where Chu Wanning might be. He took the long way round to avoid walking past his building. He tried to sleep, telling himself to enjoy the comfortable bed and air conditioning while he had it, and then gave up and drank himself into a stupor instead. He liked that. He could throw up more easily, and all he wanted to do these days was throw up.

A week after the birthday party, Mo Ran had run out of both food and motivation to go to the gym. He refused to start drinking before 4 pm (the hour had crept from 8 to 6 to 5), so he was trying to drown his hangover in preparation for the evening. He lay on his sofa while he waited for his Meituan order to arrive, balancing a four-litre bottle of water on his sternum so that a little poured into his mouth with each breath, mindlessly watching some costume drama with Chen Xinyu about time travel and an evil but sexy emperor.

A knock at the door surprised him; he briefly waterboarded himself by accident and spilt water all down the front of his t-shirt. “Coming!” he shouted in between splutters. “Took you fucking long enough – coming!”

He yanked open the door, and the heat of the un-air-conditioned corridor hit him like a truck.

Chu Wanning stood before him. The air around him was all thick, wet warmth and the shriek of cicadas, but he looked like he was a frost fairy who had just descended to earth, pale and dry and cool. He was wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, his only deference to the heat besides his topknot, and the sight of his long neck and his forearms nearly undid every knot of Mo Ran's self-restraint. In the middle of his forehead was a lilac bruise, now ringed with jade, like a horse's star.

He was holding a tube of silver-white brocade, and staring aggressively at Mo Ran's shoes.

Mo Ran looked down at him. His doom. Dread washed over him, as cold and as heavy as stone.

"Hi…" he said carefully. "Do you want to come in?"

Chu Wanning didn't raise his eyes. He thought it over. He nodded, once.

Mo Ran regretted it. Chu Wanning would want to escape, when he told him. How ironically fitting, that he should be forced to confess *here*, in his own flat, where he'd brought his victim to recover. The one and only time Chu Wanning had ever been in his flat.

"Do you want something to drink?" he offered as he let Chu Wanning in, and winced.

"Nn. Hm. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

Chu Wanning drifted through the room like a ghost. He took in the empty water bottles and the empty spirit bottles. Mo Ran hurriedly turned off the television.

"You lied."

How had he found out? How could Chu Wanning *possibly* have found out?

Mo Ran was about to drop to his knees and beg for forgiveness when Chu Wanning spoke again.

"You said that nothing would change." His voice was calm, and very soft. "You said that we were still friends."

"We are!" *We are*, for the next minute, until I tell you- "We are. I'm sorry. I only wanted to give you some space." Another lie, dropping from his lips without thought. "I wanted… I knew that I'd messed up."

"You didn't reply to my e-mails," Chu Wanning, and his face twisted; he looked away, displeased by the tone of his words. "You… I already told you that I forgave you."

"That was before I told you."

"I told *you*. Everything you've done, or think you've done." Chu Wanning went to the window and looked down into the street. "If you've changed your mind-"

"*No*." Mo Ran gripped his shoulders and turned him around. "No. Of course not."

Chu Wanning wasn't looking down now; he was staring right up at Mo Ran, so close that he could count his eyelashes.

He was so unpredictable. So often, he disliked eye contact, but sometimes, like now, he was electric with it. Mo Ran could hardly bear it. It felt preternatural.

He pushed the brocade tube against Mo Ran's chest. "Gift."

“Listen, I-”

“No,” Chu Wanning said. He pulled away and sat on the sofa, perching on the edge of the seat, and folded his hands primly in his lap. “Open it.”

Mo Ran sat down next to him. Chu Wanning’s hands were trembling despite his grip on them.

He unfurled the scroll, as it turned out to be. Chu Wanning had several of them hanging on his walls, his own calligraphy or paintings.

This had both. It was a Classical-style painting, a grass-and-insect still-life, showing a cicada on a blossoming tree branch. Above it was a poem in running script and traditional characters.

“Um,” Mo Ran said. “I, er… I don’t know what this character means…”

“It’s onomatopoeic.”

He grinned, embarrassed. “And the rest of them?”

Chu Wanning looked at him sharply. “Really?”

“Yes, really…”

“You’re not doing this to me deliberately, are you?”

“Doing what to you?”

Chu Wanning huffed and wrung his hands. His white shirt fluttered, his breaths were so shallow and so quick. He fixed his gaze on the wall, high up, where it met the ceiling. Mo Ran felt something momentous in the air, something electromagnetic.

“*Yao-yao* call the cicadas;

The grasshoppers spring about.

While I do not see my lord,

My sorrowful heart is distressed.

Let me have seen him,

Let me have met him,

And then my heart will be stilled.”

He recited it quietly and carefully, never blinking. Mo Ran watched his lips move - watched the minute tremble of them on the word *heart*.

To Chu Wanning, a handkerchief meant parting, and a painting… This painting. This poem.

Chu Wanning was waiting for his reaction. He wasn’t breathing.

Two futures lay in his hands, and he was weak. Mo Ran was tired, and he was weak, and he had been hurting all his life.

He dropped one future and clenched the other in his fist.

He lifted his hands and touched Chu Wanning’s face, turning his gaze back to him. His heart as racing at a thousand beats per minute, but if he died at this moment he wouldn’t care. “You wrote this for me?”

Chu Wanning looked down. “I wrote it out. It’s from the *Shijing*.”

“No, I mean… Wanning, you wrote this out for *me*?”

“I hardly wrote it out for your next-door neighbour, did I?” Chu Wanning snapped. There were bright spots of red in his cheeks. He lifted his hand to swat Mo Ran’s hand away; Mo Ran caught it instead.

He kissed it, and was rewarded with Chu Wanning’s sharp intake of breath and the widening of his beautiful eyes.

“You wrote it for me,” he said again, and kissed his hand again. He leant forward to kiss him properly, and Chu Wanning sprang away as though he’d been electrocuted.

Mo Ran smiled at him, heart overwhelmed with affection. All right. All right. He could take it slow. For Chu Wanning, he could do that.

There was a knock on the door. Chu Wanning started and stared at the door, and Mo Ran began to laugh.

“I ordered a Meituan,” he said, and kissed Chu Wanning’s hand a final time before he let it go and stood up. He used the app to tip the rider a hundred yuan, and then said through the interface that he could keep the food.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Chu Wanning asked.

Mo Ran couldn’t stop smiling. “Let’s go out. I want to take you on a date.”

Chapter 43: The Definition of a Date

Chapter Notes

> Ahh, thank you for waiting for this one! This time of year is *extremely* busy in my line of work, and last week was incredibly stressful. This chapter was tricky as well; normally I don't like to do a "same period; different POV" chapter, but I thought in this case it was necessary to show what our two idiots are thinking.

Chu Wanning was disappointed when he woke up on the 10th of August and discovered that both Mo Ran and Hua Binan had already left.

Disappointed, but not surprised. Given his atrocious behaviour the night before, he'd have been surprised instead if they could bear to be in the same room as him.

Xue Meng made a brave show at breakfast despite the fact that his face was as green and shiny as jade. He handed over his gift to Chu Wanning and made his excuses when his mother brought out some pork *jiaozi* for breakfast, making a mad dash for the bathroom.

"Young men these days," Xue Zhengyong laughed. "Can't hold their liquor."

Chu Wanning hadn't been able to summon a smile. His friend had just given him all the confirmation he needed. He was no longer a young man.

Xue Meng's present was a beautiful celadon vase. His mother had almost certainly helped him to pick it out, Chu Wanning thought as he lifted it from the box, and then heard the noise of something rattling inside it.

He upended the vase, and a small figure fell out. It was a very crude 3D-printed figure, with long hair in a high ponytail and a labcoat.

Chu Wanning pressed a small button on the base, and two red LEDs lit up behind the eyes.

"Do you not have enough work to be getting on with?" the figure said in Chu Wanning's own voice, badly recorded, *"Would you like some more, Xue Meng?"*

Even as depressed as he was, conflicted and raw as he was, it made him smile. He placed it on his bookshelf, next to the plaque made from the golden Tianwen shielding, posing it as though he was leaning on it.

Then he took a photograph and sent it to Xue Meng, along with a rare text message:

Excellent wiring. Good design allowing for both speaker and LEDs. I would like to make a batch order to distribute to students; will provide suitably threatening generic voice recording.

Neither praise nor humour came easily to him, but it was easier by far than thinking about Mo Ran.

But he had to. For the rest of the day he played the qin, played it until night fell as his unpracticed fingers blistered. That was how he could set his thoughts in order.

1. Chu Wanning loved Mo Ran. This was intolerable to admit, but an old outrage – he could now acknowledge it, even if he couldn't accept it.

2. Mo Ran said that he loved Chu Wanning.

3. They were no longer student and teacher.

4. Even if they were student and teacher, a relationship would not be illegal.

5. It would, however, be inappropriate, and a blow to Chu Wanning's reputation.

6. But they were no longer student and teacher.

7. But they had been.

8. It would be used against him, in the media, possibly in any future trial.

9. The Xues might never speak to him again if they knew he was gay. (Not that he was *gay*, but that was how it would *seem,* being with a. Man. A man. A nephew. A male nephew.)

10. Wang Chuqing would, maybe, but she followed her husband's lead, and Xue Zhengyong, as kind and forward-thinking as he was, was still a man approaching sixty. And what would Xue Meng think?!

11. More importantly, Mo Ran could be disowned, left without money or a job.

12. If so, any feelings he had for Chu Wanning would fade exponentially faster. He would realise swiftly that Chu Wanning was not worth any inconvenience, let alone ostracism.

13. However, Mo Ran had confessed his *current* feelings, and for the moment Chu Wanning had to accept that they were sincere and heart-felt.

14. Mo Ran had confessed his feelings, and Chu Wanning had argued and snapped and fled.

15. Mo Ran would be feeling vulnerable and rejected.

16. Chu Wanning had to somehow communicate to Mo Ran that all the fault was entirely with him.

17. He had to find a way to say that he returned Mo Ran's feelings, but that nothing could ever come of it, due to their situation and due to Chu Wanning's own deficiencies.

18. He also had to communicate this without suggesting parting. Mo Ran did not deserve abandonment. He said that they would still be friends.

19. He *also* had to communicate it in such as way that his treacherous voice and cowardly soul could realistically accomplish.

20. He needed someone else's words.

Chu Wanning came to the end of *Guangling San*, with its final violent strum, and placed his hands on the strings to silence them. Yes. Good. He had come to a conclusion and decided on a course of action.

So why did he still feel like his heart was about to stop beating?

The bizarre sensation was not helped by how little he slept. The air was too cold and dry – in Yuliang and in the police cell in Ya'an he'd longed for air conditioning, but now it made his nose itch. The duvet was too light; it tickled his legs, waking up static electricity under his skin. His Cica-care sheets had been completely abandoned.

Mo Ran didn't message, or call, or write. Chu Wanning wrote an e-mail to him on the third day and the fifth. Neither was replied to.

He was falling apart. His back *ached*, more and more – he could feel his new scapula like a bone knife in his shoulder.

Every poetry book he owned was on the floor. He had considered Christina Rossetti – *the birthday of my life is come, my love is come to me* – but no, too uncomplicatedly happy. His feelings were nothing if not complicated. And English! Mo Ran didn't know English, and so then Chu Wanning would have the horrible choice or either trying to translate it, or just giving Mo Ran a message he had no hope of understanding.

It was tempting.

No, it would have to be Chinese. But Tang or Song poetry was wrong in the opposite direction; it was all about the pain of parting, and too laden with symbolism. Mo Ran's formal education had been extremely disrupted, and while he had an excellent mind for logic and strategy, the arts bypassed him completely.

So. A simple poem that contained all of his complicated emotions.

He gave up for the night. He had been working through the list of all the parts he needed to send back to Yuliang; some of them were difficult to source, and some parts would be useless until others arrived. He tried to sort them according to what he could remember of the villager's families and which machines needed mending, but when he thought of a hot plate he remembered Mo Ran cooking for them – when he thought of a cart he thought about Mo Ran, laughing and shouting to the villagers while he was digging, sweat running down his neck, biceps straining – when he thought of a shower he thought of Mo Ran whistling in the morning, thought of him coming out wearing a towel around his hips, the lines of his iliac crests pointing down to-

Shameless! He was utterly shameless! Disgusting and depraved – how could he have the face to even meet Mo Ran's eyes?

He was so *good*, so pure of heart, so innocently passionate, and next to him, Chu Wanning was jaded, bitter, twisted. He'd left all of this too long, and the foundations of his soul had crumbled; he was a ruin, waiting for the inevitable collapse.

Sleep eluded him for hours. He regretted letting Mo Ran take the tapir pills to throw away. It was weak, but he was terrified of dreaming – nightmares about the bomb, nightmares about being arrested in the night, nightmares about landslides and stabbings and suicide, nightmares about the heat of Mo Ran's firm body next to his.

My sorrowful heart is agitated.

He was so tired that for once he *wanted* to cry, in the hope that any kind of catharsis might help exorcise the roiling emotions; he wanted to *sleep*, wanted to wake without being tortured by dreams, wanted to wake with a clear mind and a settled heart.

And my heart will then be stilled…

Instead, there was the drone of the air conditioner and the screaming of the cicadas.

He sat up with a gasp. His heartbeat was thready and patchy, making his head feel simultaneously heavy with stubbornly unshed tears and light with dizziness.

A settled heart…

He switched on his bedside lamp and scrawled the characters on the notepad he kept beside him. *Shijing. Cicadas*.

That character – was it *jiàng* or *xiáng*? My heart plummets, my heart sinks, my heart finds a safe place to land. My heart surrenders.

Chu Wanning turned out the light, and finally slept.

He ruined the first scroll, and the second. They weren't cheap either, 250 yuan a pop, and he only ever bought them in white or the palest shades of silver or gold or blue. His hand was shaking too much; the first was an error in the calligraphy, a mistake writ in Hui ink that made his head pound. In the second, the wings of the cicada perched on the branch of haitang blossoms were too dark, the veins too thick. Its wings were too rigid to allow it to fly.

"Cognitive rigidity is very common in children with loneliness disorder," he heard Dr. Fan say to Huaizui from across the years, "*It puts a real strain on relationships. It makes them more anxious, more likely to have an explosive temper, more likely to commit suicide, even*," and he poured the ludicrously expensive ink over the painting.

He slept for most of the next day, one of the brief illnesses that encroached on him when he worked too long and too hard. There was nothing to do for it but to lie in silence in the dark, with cold air and as much weight on his body as possible, squeezing the fretful energy out of his nerves. It came with the usual sore throat and nausea, but the later was probably exacerbated by Mo Ran's lack of reply to his message.

This was why, he told himself firmly. This is why nothing can come of it. You can let him know just enough not to be cruel, but his feelings are the result of obligations and fear. You've manipulated him into them, and if he saw you right now, he'd be even more manipulated. You must give him closure.

He finished the painting the next day, but left the calligraphy for the day after. The words were what was most important. The message. The cicadas still screamed, after all; his desires for purity, for integrity, for death, all still haunted him, ever-present. But they were not as important as the *junzi* he thought of.

Mo Ran was not perhaps the stereotypical *junzi* that one might imagine, and he had lost his way for a time. But he had that core of *ren*, of compassionate humanity. It was what had urged him to rescue earthworms in the rain. They had recognised it in him in Yuliang, he knew.

Ren. Humaneness. Humanity. Mo Ran abounded in it; in him, it was like a flowing river, giving life to everything around him.

It was said to be innate to all humans, but Chu Wanning knew he had a flaw in his *ren*. He didn't know whether he had been born with a deficit of it; that was why he had to work so hard, to be as kind as possible, without seeking recompense or recognition. But sometimes he wondered whether he had a painfully vast ocean of it that was dammed up behind his walls, concentrating it with a pressure that could slice through metal. In Chu Wanning, compassion was something that cut, rather than nourished.

Compassion without connection. Integrity without understanding. Rigidity and loneliness.

But he would ask for no more than to sometimes see Mo Ran. Sometimes to meet him and talk to him. That would be enough, and more than Chu Wanning deserved.

He nearly turned around before he reached the door, before he passed the Gudong Sunji hot pot restaurant, before he had traversed the People's Park, before the front door to Mo Ran's building. He climbed the stairs like he was ascending the gallows, his pathetic scroll clutched in his hands – a messenger approaching the Emperor, the Son of Heaven, sure that he would never descend again except as a corpse.

"-fucking long enough – coming!"

The door was flung open, and Mo Ran stood before him. The front of his grey vest was dark with moisture, and his hair stood up at odd angles around his face.

It was so *unfair*, that even as clearly unshowered and slovenly as he was, he was still so handsome. But then this small resentment vanished – Mo Ran's face *fell* when he saw who was on his doorstep, and he was as white as a ghost.

He was devastated.

Chu Wanning gripped the scroll until his fingers hurt. He wanted to snap them.

The impulse gained strength when Mo Ran took the scroll from him. Unable to wring it, he twisted his fingers instead, trying to ignore the temptation as he recited, the knowledge that pain would bring clarity and relief, that he could just *snap*-

Like stagnant water growing toxic, the breath that was caught in his throat was calcifying into a stone of pain. His words hung in the air like the Sword of Damocles.

And then it fell, slicing through him, because Mo Ran had cradled his face in his hands and turned it. Chu Wanning saw black eyes like Tahitian pearls, and then dropped his gaze in terror.

"You wrote this for me?"

"I wrote it out," Chu Wanning said quickly, horrified that he might have accidentally claimed to have written the song. He'd included the location of the poem on the scroll, but if Mo Ran had difficulty reading traditional characters- "It's from the *Shijing*."

"No, I mean… Wanning, you wrote this out for *me*?"

That name again. *His* name again. It was too much, much too much.

"I hardly wrote it out for your next-door neighbour, did I?" he hissed; he needed to *go*, it was time to bolt, he had to leave this instant. He slapped Mo Ran's hand away – or tried to, because Mo Ran, the infuriating beast, caught it.

Then he kissed it.

The worst thing about it was that it was not a formal kiss. It was not done slowly and deliberately. It was dropped, nonchalantly, as though Chu Wanning's hands had been kissed before. As though they were kissed *every day*. Chu Wanning had seen kisses like this, dropped onto the heads of little children and girlfriends and cats, just as Mo Ran dropped it onto the back of his hand while his shining eyes never looked away. He felt hot blood scalding his skin from the inside.

"You wrote it for me," Mo Ran said again, and kissed his hand *again*.

Then Mo Ran was leaning forward, and Chu Wanning's heart dropped. His spinal fluid turned to icemelt, his blood to acid. Suddenly his head was spinning, his memory lit up with

flashes of neon pink and purple; he felt the graze of brickwork on his hand, and in front of him, he felt the shock of seeing Shi Mei suddenly looming over him.

He scrambled back up from the sofa, but Mo Ran didn't seem insulted (and it was Mo Ran, not Shi Mei, not- not whatever he had dreamt, under the influence of that drug) – it was Mo Ran, still holding his hand, still beaming up at him with dimpled affection.

There was suddenly a knock on the door. Chu Wanning nearly jumped out of his skin, but Mo Ran laughed. "I ordered a Meituan," he said, and dropped another of those heart-stopping kisses on his hand.

While Mo Ran called down and said that the driver could keep the food, Chu Wanning struggled to bring his breathing under control. *He kissed my hand*. "Aren't you hungry?" he managed to gasp out while he tapped a propranolol into his hand. It turned out that Mo Ran was the cicada, surviving on dew.

He beamed at him. "Let's go out. I want to take you on a date."

It was the wrong moment to try to dry-swallow a pill. Chu Wanning choked and spent the next few minutes coughing, Mo Ran helping him to drink from the one clean glass in the flat.

"We can't go out on a *date*!"

"Why not?" Mo Ran asked with infuriating patience.

Chu Wanning recognised it as his own Socratic tutorial method, and it added a layer of fury to his horror. "Because! Because – that's the point of the whole poem! It, it says that just-read it!"

"That seeing me would make you happy? Seeing you makes me happy," Mo Ran said, with his despicably beautiful smile. "It also says meeting, doesn't it? So let's meet for a date."

“Seeing you, seeing me – what if someone sees *us*?”

“So? We’re just two friends out for dinner. We’ve been out for dinner together plenty of times now.”

“But…!” But they would *see*, they would *know*: his guilt would announce them from miles away. “But what- A date is *different*.”

“How?”

“You know perfectly well!”

“I don’t. A date doesn’t have to involve anything you don’t want it to. It’s just company and conversation. This could be a date.”

Chu Wanning made a noise like a boiling kettle. “This is *not* a- Your category is too broad!”

“It’s not. You like me. And I *really* like you. So, we meet to talk and enjoy each other’s company. That’s all it is.”

“But then what- there’s no need to call it a date then!”

“We won’t, if that’s what you want,” Mo Ran said easily. “But if it’s a *date*, well… It means I don’t have to hide how happy I am. I’m allowed to spoil you more.”

“You impudent-! Why would you be the one spoiling me? I’m older!”

“You want to be my sugar daddy?” Mo Ran said, and caught the not-entirely-fake punch Chu Wanning threw his way. “Joking, joking! No, seriously… I get to be the one to spoil you because I think I’ve had a bit more experience dating than you…?”

Chu Wanning’s face twisted. Mo Ran was right, of course, but he wasn’t going to admit it.

“You can call me Mo-*laoshi*.”

“You’re going to need a date with the doctor when I’m finished with you, Mo Ran!”

“As long as it’s not Hua Binan.” Mo Ran was grinning; his eyes were shining, and every time Chu Wanning darted a glance his way, he was staring right at Chu Wanning’s face. “A date with a doctor’s what I’m after, but only one doctor will do…”

“A date with a *medical* doctor!”

Mo Ran laughed. “I know, I know. I know. I can’t help teasing you. You’re just so cute.”

“You-!” Chu Wanning said, pointedly looking away. But he could feel the heat across his cheeks and rising like steam to the tops of his ears.

Of all the adjectives ever thrown his way, *that* had never been one of them.

“Tell me off over dinner,” Mo Ran pressed. “I need to give you your birthday present.”

“It’s bad luck to give it after the date.”

“Then it’s a Happy Thursday present. And I’m so hungry! I’m starving, and I sent my Meituan away-”

“Fine, fine!” Chu Wanning snapped. He felt the abyss opening up beneath his feet, but… just for *once*. For once, couldn’t he make two people happy, instead of two people miserable?

That would be allowed, right?

Just to eat together.

“You need to shower.”

If Mo Ran had been a dog, he’d had broken his tail wagging it so hard. “Absolutely! Yes, definitely, ha! I’ll pick you up at the bottom of your building? Half seven?”

“If you can wait that long,” Chu Wanning said. He didn’t dare to make eye contact with Mo Ran, and strode to the door. Half seven. That only gave him a few hours to prepare.

“Ah, it’ll be hard to go without seeing you for so long, but I’ll try!”

“To eat!”

Chapter 44: Live, Laugh, Laundry

Chapter Notes

> As of 4pm I am officially out of the office, yay! Obviously I immediately booted this up. In this chapter, they finally go on a date, and no one is blown up, no buildings collapse, no one is shot or maimed or killed. You all had faith that I could do it, and I managed it. 💪😤 Saving all the good stuff for later chapters lol. 😈 Thank you for your faith and patience! 😂♥

The hours until half past seven stretched before Chu Wanning like a body on the rack. The period was both too short to completely rebuild his entire face and body and personality and neurology, and also too long, far too long, to spend in such agonising suspense.

He had showered and washed his hair and put on clean clothes before going to deliver the poem, and now he showered again and put on an identical clean shirt. He rolled the sleeves up and down, up and down in the mirror, until the sight of his skinny wrists and the red scars on his forearms disgusted him, and he left them down despite the heat. But now the sleeves were wrinkled, so he tried to iron them, and in his distraction, imagining all the disasters that awaited him – the Xues jumping out to denounce him as a pervert featured in most of them – he burnt a hole right through it.

A new white shirt, this morning's in the washing machine, and the other in the bin.

He had a horror of any kind of bodily uncleanliness; Huaizui had always said that he clearly couldn't control his face, his voice, his expression or his personality, but at the very least he didn't offend others with his hygiene. It had been a compliment, coming from him.

He put the barely-worn shirt in with the rest of his laundry, filled a cap of Blue Moon liquid detergent, and poured it in.

What if Mo Ran wanted to go out again? He needed his clothes to be the cleanest they had ever been. He poured in another cap's worth, and then, after a few seconds, one more. That should do it. They'd definitely be clean from that.

He paced around his apartment, snapping his fingers, lashing the air with an invisible tail. He had never been on a date, and he had no idea what it was supposed to involve. He'd ended up watching a few dramas in Shanghai, purely from lack of absolutely anything else to do, and there was clearly an associated symbolic language of tight black dresses, upscale restaurants, and roses.

He briefly thought of Mo Ran, in the skin-tight black vest Chu Wanning had made for him.

And then what did the man and woman do? There was a lot of coy smiling and tucking of hair behind ears. Maybe he ought to wear the headband he wore when he went running, because that was clearly an issue for a lot of them. All the demure looks downwards made the hair fall forwards, after all.

He lifted his chin stubbornly.

He had learnt from past mistakes, and knew better than to practice expressions in the mirror. It would just depress him. Well, as Huaizui used to say, if he didn't want to practice, he could deepen his understanding through research instead.

Chu Wanning sat at his desk and woke his computer.

What does dating entail

"Dating is a stage of romantic relationships in which two individuals engage in an activity together, most often with the intention of evaluating each other's suitability as a partner in a future intimate relationship."

Chu Wanning groaned and tugged on his ponytail in frustration. There could *be* no intimate relationship, and Chu Wanning was manifestly unsuitable for one!

“A stage of romantic relationships” – unbearable! Intolerable! He had to look away from the monitors, he felt so embarrassed.

Every page was like that. “Assessing compatibility” – they weren’t compatible, so what were they doing? He decided to change tack.

First date conversation topics

The results for this were even more useless. *“Do you come here often? Do you like this neighbourhood?”* Totally pointless. Wuchang only had one neighbourhood.

“Ask them about their family.” Chu Wanning already knew about Mo Ran’s family, and he knew that it was not an appropriate subject for a date.

Twenty-odd years or so before, Xue Zhengyong’s older brother had had a love affair with a woman called Mo Guiying. She had given him her supposed life savings in order to help him and his brother begin their first construction company, and he had promised that he would return to Guangzhou when he’d made a success of it. What he didn’t know was that she had actually borrowed a great deal of the money to give to him, and six months later she had vanished, pregnant, on the run from the Triad-connected money lender she’d borrowed from.

She’d settled in Xiangtan and started a brothel – by all accounts, a pretty successful one – and had his child. But fourteen years later a fire had ripped through the building, leaving Mo Guiying dead (along with three prostitutes, an unidentified teenage boy who worked in the kitchen, and the young daughter of the tofu-seller from over the road). Her son vanished into the back-streets and fell in with a gang, smuggling knives and burner phones and drugs around the country.

Xue Zhengyong had been almost mad with grief following the death of his beloved brother. He had promised an extortionate reward to anyone who discovered the whereabouts of his nephew, and three years later, a private investigator called Bao Jiu had plucked Mo Ran from a holding cell and brought him to Wuchang.

So, no. Family was out. Work, preferences, films and music…

He caught sight of something gently moving in the corner of his vision from the direction of the bathroom, white and shimmering.

At 7:40 the front door buzzer started to sound. Chu Wanning shook the foam from his arms and pressed the intercom with his elbow. “Just come up!” he barked and shoved open the front door.

He sat down on the bathroom floor again and registered that Mo Ran’s approaching footsteps sounded angry.

“What the hell?! You just buzzed me in, you didn’t even ask who it was! And then you left the front door open, what if I was here to kill you- whoa.”

“Washing machine’s broken,” Chu Wanning said. “I managed to keep most of the foam from getting into the electrics, but I thought I should probably take it apart to check.”

“Huh.” Mo Ran squatted on his heels and surveyed the wreckage. “Too much soap?”

“Mn. Perhaps.”

“I mean, you’ve… you’ve used this before, right?”

“I used to go to the dry cleaners across the road.”

“You don’t need to *dry-clean* shirts.”

“They weren’t just dry cleaning. They’d sort it and do all the washing and drying and ironing and folding for me,” Chu Wanning said.

“How much was that?”

“About 300 yuan a week.” He saw the outraged expression on Mo Ran’s face, and felt the familiar squirm of shame. “They did all my sheets and everything as well, and they charged a flat rate for each batch for me as a favour, instead of by item.”

“As a favour-! If they were still here, I’d go and shake them by the fucking ankles!”

“It meant I didn’t have to think about it. But when I came back, they weren’t there anymore.”

“Yeah, because their meal ticket disappeared for five months. You were probably paying their rent.” Chu Wanning was sure that his anxiety that this thought engendered was not visible on his face, but Mo Ran seemed to spot it anyway. “Don’t worry about them. You were paying them plenty, but nowhere can rely on a single customer, can they?”

Chu Wanning bent over to hide his face in the machinery again. Mo Ran might have a rich family *now*, but he’d spent time on the streets. He probably thought he was spoilt to the core, to be able to pay to have his washing done for him.

He’s always known it was probably too much to pay for laundry every week, but he was just so terrible at it – when he remembered to do it, he always messed it up, or forgot it in the machine, or left it on the line for too long or didn’t have what he needed when he needed it. When he’d tried to do it himself at Rufeng, he’d ruined clothes over and over again, and the flat rate was just cheaper in the long run. One task called *laundry* was in fact a dozen actions and decisions and considerations that overwhelmed him.

“Were you nervous?” Mo Ran asked gently.

“No!”

“But a good distraction. If you *were* nervous.”

“I wasn’t nervous, Mo Ran! As though *you* could make me nervous; you’ve got quite the opinion of yourself,” he said, head bowed, ears burning. He’d already fucked up their evening. He might as well make Mo Ran call it a night.

“Eh, in some respects. … there’s no leaking anymore, is there?”

“No. But I haven’t mended the machine yet.”

“So mend it tomorrow. Come and eat now.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “My shirt’s wet.”

“It’s Sichuan. They’ll think you’re just sweaty.”

“Shut up!”

“No, seriously, put on a new one. Put on a t-shirt.”

Chu Wanning shook his head again.

Mo Ran reached over his shoulder and plucked the solenoid inlet valve from his hands. “We won’t mend it today. I’ll come round tomorrow and you can enjoy it. But tonight, we have to eat.”

Mo Ran placed his hand flat over Chu Wanning’s spine and made him jump, giving the lie to his lack of nerves.

“Talk to me. What are you worried about?”

“*Nothing*-”

“And I know you are, so don’t lie. You’re not dishonest,” Mo Ran said with a smile in his voice.

Chu Wanning glared at the inlet valve that had been stolen from him. “… talking.”

“We’re talking right now.”

“Not date-talking.”

“Nope, this is date-talking. Any talking can be date-talking. If the word ‘date’ is what’s making it weird then let’s just go and eat.”

It was a tempting offer. But Chu Wanning had learnt some cues over the years, and he could feel that however much he was trying to hide it, Mo Ran was... disappointed.

“What do *you* talk about, on a date?” he asked before he lost his courage. “Give me five topics.”

The dazzling smile that Mo Ran gave him was worth the humiliation. “The thing is, we already know way more about each other than most people would on a first date. In the first… ten, twenty dates.” He was quiet for a second. “All right. The five topics. What the food is like. What I thought of Du Fu and Li Bai. The best of the wuxia books I’ve read so far. The other patients in Shanghai. What you’re thinking about going back to work in September.”

Chu Wanning glanced sidelong at Mo Ran. "…those are date-topics?"

"Yes. Perfectly calibrated given how long we've known each other, but light and airy enough for a good atmosphere while we eat. And if we get through them, I'd like to learn more about tai chi." Mo Ran, the utter monster, waited for his breathing to settle. "Acceptable?"

Chu Wanning nodded.

"Great." Mo Ran flicked at his cheek. "Bit of foam."

Chu Wanning gave the dismembered washing machine a final dark look and stood up. "Well, I don't have a handkerchief, do I?"

"I actually have a handkerchief for sale." Mo Ran pulled out a handkerchief from his shirt pocket. "One yuan."

"One yuan?" Chu Wanning received it and turned it over in his hands. A spray of clumsily embroidered haitang blossoms shone up at him.

In spite of his gut-churning anxiety, it warmed his fingertips.

"I like the design very much, but I think you're trying to cheat me. One yuan is extortionate, given the craftsmanship…"

"Hey! I'll have sir know that I'm the second-best embroiderer in this whole room."

"Ah, well, in that case, I'll pay your one yuan, but don't expect me to recommend you to my friends."

“I’d tell you not to even if you wanted to. I only embroider for a highly selective clientele. Only a true connoisseur can appreciate my artistic vision.”

Chu Wanning pretended to blow his nose, and Mo Ran’s explosion of laughter settled his stomach just a little.

They went to Gudong Sunji, and Mo Ran ordered a mild hotpot between them. No one shouted and pointed at the depraved moaning beast of a professor. No one jumped out at them. They just sat in a booth, Mo Ran charming the waitress with his smile, and Chu Wanning opened the wine bottle for them.

Chu Wanning would have been hard pressed to understand why this dinner was a date. Mo Ran had said that it would allow him to smile at him more and spoil him more, but he was behaving just like they had in Yuliang – picking out the choicest cuts of meat and placing them in Chu Wanning's bowl, topping up his glass for him, leaning his chin on his hand and listening to him talk with a smile.

The hotpot was a good initial conversation topic, with so many ingredients to choose from, and Mo Ran skillfully led them through the exact subjects he had specified. This was calming to Chu Wanning, that the evening was going exactly as outlined; it made him trust that there would be no surprises, and that Mo Ran had everything in hand.

It was like Shanghai, he thought. It had been… restful, to give himself entirely over to the doctors, the experts, whom he respected, and allow them to set his routine. This felt rather like that. It was very strange, to allow someone else to hold the reins of his evening. Strange… but not as terrifying as he would have predicted.

Not if it was Mo Ran.

Only when Chu Wanning had promised to teach Mo Ran the Beijing form did they run out of script.

Mo Ran’s eyes flashed mischievously as the waiter took away the remnants of the hotpot. “You know, at some nightclubs they have foam parties.”

“Foam parties?”

“Uh-huh. Foam all over the dancefloor. I thought you were throwing one for us in your flat.” Mo Ran’s smile twisted a bit. “With everyone invited. Please, seriously, you *have* to use the intercom to ask who’s there. You can’t buzz in everyone, and you can’t open the door without using the chain first.”

Chu Wanning looked away, feeling scolded, and then, under the table, Mo Ran took his hand.

“I know it was because you were expecting me, but… please. Shizun. Or I won’t be able to sleep. I’ll be too worried.”

“I’ll use the intercom.”

“Do you promise?”

He rolled his eyes. “I promise.”

He was rewarded by Mo Ran squeezing his hand, but then he didn’t let go as Chu Wanning had expected. Instead, he looked up and said they’d get a pudding as well, as though he wasn’t secretly *holding his hand*. How could Mo Ran be so shameless? How could he be so brazen?

Even when both of his hands were on the table, pouring more wine for them, his knee was pressed against Chu Wanning’s, a firm locus of heat.

The dessert came, two plates of water chestnut cake, and a small carafe of sweet wine.

Mo Ran looked mischievously delighted. “Can I give you your present?”

Chu Wanning shifted in his seat. “It depends what it is…”

He realised too late how shamelessly flirtatious that sounded, and by the widening of Mo Ran’s eyes, it hadn’t escaped his notice either.

Chu Wanning buried his face in his hands.

Mo Ran laughed, and pulled them down.

“I didn’t mean it like that!”

“I know, I know! Ah, Shizun, you’re so red. No, don’t worry, I looked up the gift taboos this time.”

Chu Wanning felt an ember of relief that he wasn’t the only one who’d done research for their date, and he opened the small box that Mo Ran placed in front of him.

Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t this.

He drew out a silver chain, from which hung a red pendant. It was a cabochon teardrop, a deep crimson colour, like a drop of blood.

No one had ever bought a piece of jewellery for him; he doubted that he had ever owned one before. He didn’t know why Mo Ran had thought of him with this, but… But it was lovely.

“What stone is it? Not a garnet, it’s brighter than that…”

“The lady called it a dragon’s blood crystal, but I knew you’d want the proper name. She said it was jasper.”

“I’m not sure…” Chu Wanning dangled the pendant in front of the candle that graced their table. “Look, it’s translucent. Not very much, but the light does shine through it.”

“Does light not shine through jasper?”

“Nn. Maybe it’s agate…”

“’*Horse brain*’?” Mo Ran repeated the name in disgust.

“Mn. The Mongolians thought that the bands of colour in it looked like the folds of a horse’s brain… It could be agate... You see, jasper is a type of quartz. Quartz crystals are either macrocrystalline or cryptocrystalline, and there’s a variety of cryptocrystalline quartz called chalcedony, which is quartz with very fine intergrowths of moganite. If it’s completely opaque then it's jasper, but if it’s translucent, then it’s agate. Agate is usually striated or banded though, and this is all one colour… If the bands in agate are big enough, then you can cut out a piece that’s both translucent *and* a uniform colour, and that’s what’s called a carnelian; it’s microscopically identical to agate, but it doesn’t have the patterns. The Lotus Sutra distinguishes between agate and carnelian – if you translate the ‘lotus-pink stone’ to be carnelian, obviously – but it was composed before Dharmakirti and the other Buddhist atomists, so I suppose we must forgive them. So your seller is right, you’d normally associate a crimson this perfect with jasper, but I would guess that it’s actually an unusually dark and vivid carnelian.”

Mo Ran was staring at him. “Wow.”

It was like stepping into an icy shower. This, *this* feeling was a familiar one – the sudden horror when he realised that he’d been talking without thinking. How pretentious he sounded – how arrogant, to correct the woman who had sold it! He wasn’t a geologist, what right did he have to an opinion? And even if he was sure he was right, he just sounded utterly *insufferable*.

He wanted to apologise, but he couldn’t. It lodged stuck in his mouth. If he apologised then he would only draw attention to it. “I mean, it’s beautiful,” he ventured with a croak.

“I’m glad you like it,” Mo Ran said softly. There was a complicated expression on his face, something that Chu Wanning couldn’t parse. “It was worth it just to hear your analysis. I could listen to you talk for hours.”

If they had been in a tournament, it would have been an instant knock-out. Chu Wanning felt as though Mo Ran had just hamstrung him or cut his legs out from under him, and he flailed for a response.

“If she said it’s jasper then it’s probably jasper.”

“I'd trust you over her any day. We can try putting it under the microscope if you like. I never knew you knew so much about stones.”

“I don’t, really.” He twisted the hem of the tablecloth. “Not much. But soil make-up is important in slope stability analysis, so while I was learning that I thought I’d spend a little time on geology.... I didn't want to be completely ignorant. And I thought that the different stones were…” The word that came to mind made him sound like a little girl. “Interesting.”

“They’re really pretty,” Mo Ran agreed with his unspoken assessment, and Chu Wanning didn’t know how he did it. How was Mo Ran so confident, so masculine and easy-mannered? He’d never stop admiring him for it. “You know, the tumbled stones you can get in the market? When I was a kid I thought they looked like a hero's treasure hoard. And they’re nice to play with. To roll them in your hands, I mean. Like the walnuts.”

Chu Wanning had complicated feelings about walnuts and other *wenwan*. When others rolled them in their hands, it was an ancient and well-regarded custom. But when, as a child, he’d rhythmically turned things over and over in his hands, it had been a *symptom* for which Huaizui had given him a sharp rap on the knuckles.

To distract himself, he brought his hair around, to try to put the necklace on. But he’d never put a necklace on before, and he realised that he hadn’t caught all of his hair, nor did he know

how to work the clasp.

“Let me, let me.”

Chu Wanning surrendered the chain, heart pounding. He looked around nervously, assessing whether anyone in the restaurant was looking at them; everything else might look like an ordinary meal between friends, but a man putting on another man’s necklace... That felt *shockingly* intimate.

“There.” Mo Ran looked down at his chest. “Perfect. It looks really good on you. You’ve got such fair skin – black and white with a drop of red looks amazing.”

“Like in *Schindler’s List,*” Chu Wanning said darkly, and then had to explain the reference.

The chain on the back of his neck was warm with Mo Ran’s warmth, like his hand was still ghosting a touch through his hair…

They split the bill. Chu Wanning fiddled with his new necklace as they stepped out; it felt smooth and cool to his touch. He never wanted to take it off.

“Let me walk you home.”

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. That usually happened on the dramas – the man walked the woman home. “Let *me* walk *you* home.”

Mo Ran looked unimpressed. “I’d rather see you home okay.”

“Well, I’d rather see *you* home okay.”

“I’m not the one someone tried to bomb, so.”

“So, you’ll be able to protect me from a bomb? If I remember correctly, I protected *you* from the bomb.”

“Okay, okay.” Mo Ran held out a fist. “Play you for it.”

His rock beat Chu Wanning’s scissors. “Don’t sulk,” he said, when Chu Wanning marched off without him, arms folded. “Here.”

He pulled Chu Wanning’s hand down, and hooked his index finger around Chu Wanning’s.

Chu Wanning froze. But he didn’t pull away.

Mo Ran waited for a moment, and then, emboldened, took his whole hand. “The traditional end to a date.”

Chu Wanning’s ears felt as though his hair was on fire. Again. He had seen something else considered to be the traditional end to a date – at least, a date that had gone well. But even the touch of Mo Ran’ hand was too much; too hot, slightly wet, with all the sensation of *skin*. And the fear that someone should see it, that someone might notice, take a photograph, or just assault them right there in the street… The thought of a kiss was untenable. But if Mo Ran didn’t try to kiss him, did that mean that the date had gone badly?

He tried to look calm and comfortable, as though people held his hand every day. A hand that had been kissed. But he felt as though his bones were filled with lead, and his ligaments had turned to mercury; his legs refused to work properly, and he moved like a badly-rusted engine.

They stopped outside the door to his building. Mo Ran squeezed his hand and let go of it, and Chu Wanning prepared himself for the rejection that was coming. He knew that he had been awkward and unaffectionate, stiff, managing even less eye contact than usual. Mo Ran would

have to be mad to want to go on another date – he'd have come to his senses and realised that whatever this experiment was was doomed to failure.

"Can I still come around tomorrow?" Mo Ran asked. "To help with the washing machine?"

Chu Wanning stared fiercely at a cigarette butt in the gutter. Mo Ran was phrasing it as though it was a favour to *him*. "Mn. If you want to."

"I very much want to," Mo Ran said. His voice was so warm, so sincere. Above him, in Chu Wanning's peripheral vision, he looked up and down the street, and then bent to press a swift kiss to Chu Wanning's cheek.

It was over and done in a second, but Chu Wanning could feel it seared onto his skin like a brand. It would be visible for all time, a beautiful scar, painful and exquisite.

"Tomorrow?" Mo Ran asked with a smile, and Chu Wanning jerked his head in a single nod. "Great. Brilliant."

Mo Ran sprinted off like a child, turning to wave when he was over the road. Chu Wanning, one hand pressed to his burning cheek, waved back.

Chapter 45: A Time of Rest

Chapter Notes

> Happy New Year! 🥂✨ Thank you for waiting, and thank you for reading and commenting, I love you all! 😭♥

The following month was the most joyful of Chu Wanning's life.

It certainly wasn't calm or peaceful; on the contrary, he felt as though he never stopped vibrating, from a potent mixture of fear and happiness and overstimulation. It made him uncomfortable at first, before he could finally decide on the word 'joy'– Dr. Fan had called this difficulty in naming his emotions *alexithymia*, and this sensation was one he had rarely felt before.

The last time… He thought that the last time had been with Rong Yan, at the conferences they had attended in Paris and Kyoto. It had been the first time that he had felt truly understood and accepted as he was.

And that was what he felt now.

He could not believe that this was his life. He ate with Mo Ran in restaurants, and Mo Ran never became impatient with his food choices; no, he would order exactly what Chu Wanning liked, and picked out the best pieces for him. They practiced tai chi in the park, Mo Ran eager to learn, smiling and laughing at his own relative lack of balance. They walked together through the night-market in the late-August warmth, and Mo Ran seemed to realise when the press of people and the loud cries of the stall-keepers were becoming too much even before Chu Wanning did himself. Mo Ran carried an umbrella for them in case it rained. And when they walked together, Mo Ran would hook his finger around Chu Wanning's, silently asking for permission, before holding his hand.

The only time he seemed at all displeased was when he asked Chu Wanning what he'd been doing about his Cica-care sheets, and even then, his anger was directed at himself. Every

night, they ended the evening with Mo Ran helping him with his back, and then a chaste kiss on the cheek or the forehead.

That was the thing that made Chu Wanning pause. Because on the one hand, he was grateful that Mo Ran was taking things so slowly. All of this affection and attention was utterly overwhelming to him, and often engendered a feeling similar to panic in his chest; it was so unfamiliar, so strange and unexpected, and it felt sometimes as though he was living in a dream. Maybe he'd never woken up after the bomb-blast, and this was all a dying hallucination contained within a second of serotonin-induced euphoria.

Sometimes this thought was terrifying. Sometimes, it was calming.

So, on the one hand, he knew that anything more than these brief, chaste kisses might make his faulty brain shut down entirely. But the more days they spent together, the more he began to worry that for all of Mo Ran's understanding and affection, perhaps that was all there was to it.

He told himself he didn't mind. Understanding and affection were more than he could ever have asked for, and certainly more than he deserved. To even think of *passion* was presumptuous beyond words.

But it was like a needle in him. He intellectually knew that his face and the scarred body that Mo Ran attended to so carefully couldn't be expected to inspire lust in any right-thinking human being, but the fact that Mo Ran seemed to find it so easy… hurt. Just a little. Only in the darkness and the silence of the night.

*

The same month was the most agonising of Mo Ran's life.

He was quite sure that he was going to die. He was hard so often that he thought his blood would start clotting in his dick and give him a stroke. It was a toss-up as to whether his balls or his brain were going to blow first, or whether they'd both go in the same instant like

something out of a cheap horror film, semen pouring from his eye sockets and his penis exploding like an overcooked microwave meal.

Every day there was something: lunch, dinner, a walk in the park or the night-market, the sadistic monster trying to show him the beginning of the 42-form of tai chi.

Chu Wanning could raise his foot above his head. He called it Step 23, a Left Snap Kick. Mo Ran called it his inevitable cause of death.

But he would endure it. He would have to, however blue his balls were. Because Chu Wanning was slowly, so slowly, opening up like a bud in spring.

He offered opinions. He let Mo Ran hold his hand. He laughed.

He fucking *laughed*. It was the most beautiful thing Mo Ran had ever seen. It made him want to write poetry and crow to the world that *he*, a dog from the street, had managed to make the best and shyest man in the world laugh.

On their last date, it had been Chu Wanning who had first hooked his little finger around Mo Ran's, looking around for any witnesses, and then ducking his head to hide his blush, oblivious to the fact that his perfidiously sensitive ears betrayed him.

Mo Ran suddenly understood why women pretended to eat babies' hands and cheeks and legs, or seemed angry at the sight of kittens or puppies; it was so cute he wanted to punch a fucking wall, or grab Chu Wanning and *bite* him.

But apart from that, in the clarity that followed every emergency wank, Mo Ran remembered things.

He remembered Chu Wanning, drugged out of his mind, trying to push him away, worried about taking advantage of the student who was taking such monstrous, evil advantage of him.

He remembered the night he had confessed, how anxious and overwhelmed and confused Chu Wanning had been, how he had thought it was all some cruel trick or plan to entrap him.

As, six months before, it would have been.

Worst of all, he remembered the godawful night that Chu Wanning had tried to kill himself.

I haven't been the teacher you deserved, Mo Ran. I've been… You deserved better than me.

I've burdened you. I endangered you. And I…

He'd not understood then, why every time he'd called him 'Chu-*laoshi*' he'd grown more distressed, while every use of 'Shizun' calmed him down just a little.

I'm no good, Mo Ran.

You don't know. If you knew, you'd be disgusted*. I'm* disgusting.

That night, in his farewell, he'd apologised to Mo Ran for being strict with him and for the bomb. But he hadn't been able to confess what he'd felt, even to apologise. Mo Ran was sure now that that was what he meant, on the roof – his feelings for a student were so disgusting, to him – and he thought to Mo Ran – that he couldn't confess them. He could only eradicate them, by eradicating himself with them.

And remembering made it easy the next day (well, not *easy* easy. Not even easy, really, but tolerable. Bearable. Okay, possible) to limit himself to a single chaste kiss, to control himself when he touched the skin of Chu Wanning's scarred, naked back, perched on the edge of his bed or his sofa, to nudge his knee under the table while they bantered over dinner, to protest that he'd prioritised strength over flexibility as Chu Wanning tried to manipulate his limbs into some tai chi form, to subtly hold his hand as he walked.

Because what Chu Wanning was allowing himself now was something he'd been prepared to kill himself before even mentioning six months ago.

That kind of courage was something that Mo Ran could barely fathom. And he reminded himself that this was so much harder for Chu Wanning than standing up to corrupt police and university presidents or CEOs as a teenager, or taking on the entire Chinese military and government in his twenties. Holding hands with a man, letting him dress his back, accepting his kiss with those wide, phoenix eyes… His courage increased every decade.

Though, to be fair to himself, he hoped that it wouldn't be Chu Wanning's *fortieth* birthday before they were able to do anything else.

*

The second week of September brought the Induction Ceremony for the new students of Sisheng, which Chu Wanning was expected to attend, though Xue Zhengyong was not so cruel as to ask him to give a speech.

He was worried about it, even if he didn't have to speak. Over two thousand new students staring at him, already loathing him, the ugly and infamous traitor. The secretary of the CPC Sisheng University Committee and the Wuchang Party would be attending, both long-standing enemies. Faculty, old and new, despising him. Even the children from the affiliated primary school, who were going to perform a flag dance and lead the national anthem (Xue Zhengyong was principled, not stupid, and was perfectly happy to play the game right until the moment he wasn't).

But it wasn't mere stage fright. As the ceremony drew closer, he began to wake up once or twice a night, imagining the sports field ravaged by bomb-blasts, scattering bodies-

When this happened, he went to make himself some tea. Mo Ran had seen him looking at a caddy in the night market and bought it for him, a sweet summer brew with honey and rose petals.

Even if everyone survived the opening ceremony, after that he'd have to endure the departmental inductions, and as Head of the School of Mechanical and Civil Engineering, Chu Wanning would have to give his lecture then. So he sat revising his old lectures and notes until he fell asleep again on the sofa, usually with his phone pinging with a message from Mo Ran.

A couple of days before the ceremony, they went for a day trip to Yuliang, ostensibly to deliver all the replacement parts that Chu Wanning had promised to source for the villagers. He'd splashed out on a new Leatherman Wave for himself (his old stalwart having disappeared in the blast or the hospital), and he enjoyed showing off all the tools on it, fixing whatever little machines were brought to him by the villagers, while Mo Ran swung his younger admirers around by their ankles.

It gave him the confidence he needed to endure the Induction ceremony. He wasn't hated by *everyone*. He could do things, build things, make things, fix things. He could help people.

"*I am the Head of Civil Engineering*." He wrote the characters for 'civil engineering' on his notepad. The clock on his laptop read 04:17. In less than six hours, the Induction Ceremony would begin. "*The work of weights and measurements, rules, regulations, laws, standards, models. This engineering is thus the weighing and measurement of earth and wood. However, in English, the word 'civil' is used to describe this subject instead. This is to distinguish it from its sibling: military engineering."*

He pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. Too pointed?

He should ask Mo Ran for advice. After all, Mo Ran had thought he was a prick for years, so he'd have plenty of ideas of what he ought *not* to say.

"*Civil engineering is engineering that serves the* civilian *population. Ordinary people trust engineers with their lives every day, and their trust is so great that until a disaster happens, they don't even notice that that is what they have been doing. Becoming worthy of this trust is the foundation and guiding principle of this course*."

No. No, no, no – he scribbled out his notes. He always sounded so pretentious, so self-righteous, so utterly humourless and puffed up with self-importance. Why could he not be as

easy-going a teacher like the universally beloved Shu Yunjia, or witty and funny like Lan Lucun?

He gave up on his notes; his own lecture wasn't for another week's time. Mo Ran dropped around the morning of the ceremony with a takeaway of pearl green milk tea. Chu Wanning had asked whether he looked like a teenage girl, to which he of course received the predictable answer, and he chewed the tapioca balls while they argued their way to the campus.

The Induction Ceremony went well. No one died, despite the dullness of some of the speeches. Chu Wanning thought that Xue Zhengyong would be busy all week with events for the new students, but was surprised to be invited to a late supper that night, after a formal drinks reception. Just him and Wang Chuqing, in Wuchang's nicest restaurant.

Mo Ran pouted, looking irritatingly cute while he did so, but he said that he wouldn't mind an evening at the gym, which he knew bored Chu Wanning to death.

It was rare that they ate out at a restaurant, but not unheard of. Wang Chuqing probably wanted a break from cooking. They discussed the ceremony and the speeches, and throughout the meal Chu Wanning felt a rising tension between the three of them.

"Didn't they all look so young?" Wang Chuqing said. "All fresh from their *gaokao*, away from home for the first time…"

Chu Wanning made a non-committal noise. He'd tried not to look at any of the faces in the crowd.

"I remember all the hours you gave us, tutoring Mo Ran for the *gaokao*. I still don't know how you did it, in the time you had." Wang Chuqing was staring at him. "I remember you saying that it had been such a long time, since you'd taken it yourself…"

His stomach clenched with nausea. She was right. Chu Wanning had tutored Mo Ran for the *gaokao*, and he'd had to revise for it himself, it had been so long since he had taken it. Was it

was her kind, subtle way of reminding him of the age difference between them, and how inappropriate it would be…?

He swallowed the bile in his throat, and as he tried to speak, she interrupted him.

“How old were you? When you sat it?”

“Ten.”

“You got 730, didn’t you?”

“734.”

“The best score for fifty years. At ten.”

“Huaizui wanted me to be the first to score 750. At least no one’s beaten me to that yet,” he said, as though he gave a damn.

“He was disappointed?” she asked softly. “With 734?”

Chu Wanning bit down sharply on the inside of his cheek. “Yes. Chuqing-”

“With 734. At ten. That man should be in prison for the rest of his life, but… I feel that we owe you an apology too.”

He blinked. “Chuqing, I don’t understand.”

“You know how when my husband gets drunk, he says that you’re his little brother?” She squeezed Xue Zhengyong’s hand; he looked at Chu Wanning with deep, solemn eyes. “He shouldn’t say that.”

She knew. His certainty was like stone, like ice. She *knew*.

He closed his eyes and waited for the killing blow with his head bowed.

“He’s twice your age. We looked at the new students out there today and thought they were children, and that was, what, two years after he first met you? You were younger than them by a year the first time you came to dinner with us. And we were as bad as everyone else, talking to *Dr. Chu* and asking him about his publication plans as though- as though he wasn’t a *child.*”

“Chuqing, no. Please. I *was* a doctor. I was never… I was never that kind of child.”

“I know. Don’t you see how that’s worse? If I had the Chintamani I’d wish that you could be a child again. Not again. For the first time.”

“But without the Chintamani,” Xue Zhengyong said carefully, “we can at least make sure that you have a break. That you have a proper chance to rest and recover.”

Chu Wanning felt as though he was on a rollercoaster, or an out-of-control lift – down, up, down, darkness and confusion all the while. “Are you firing me?” he asked, voice quiet.

That’s why it was in a restaurant, without the boys. So he wouldn’t make a scene.

“No!” Wang Chuqing said, and her husband growled “*No*” at the same time.

They looked at each other.

“But… it’s nearly seven years since you came to Sisheng,” Xue Zhengyong said. “And it’s the perfect time for a sabbatical.”

“A week ago, you gave me the time for my induction lecture,” Chu Wanning said. “You… you said I had a new office, in the Science building. I don’t-” *I don’t understand*. But then he did. “Who was it?”

“There wasn’t-”

“It was Tanlang, wasn’t it?”

“He’s a doctor too,” Wang Chuqing said. “And the medical sort! He said that six months just isn’t enough time to recover from something like this.”

Chu Wanning spread out his hands. “I’m here. I can walk. Stand, speak, teach. I have recovered.”

“But it’s only been *six months*- Wanning, *please*. Please.”

“I said that you were going to take it,” Xue Zhengyong said. He was being uncharacteristically serious. “One year’s sabbatical leave for independent research, on full pay. As we would give to any academic who’s been with us for more than five years.”

“Even if I didn’t ask for it?”

“Yuheng. You’ve been working for fourteen years and never taken a sabbatical. And now all this… It’s just what you need.”

“I had a sabbatical.”

“Four months of RSDL is *not* a sabbatical!”

“Boys,” Wang Chuqing warned them. She was still holding her husband’s hand, and now she reached across the table to take Chu Wanning’s. He managed to resist the temptation to pull it free, but the potent feeling of betrayal and unfamiliar touch made his skin crawl.

But he had no right to feel betrayed, did he? At the end of the day, because of him, there was a crater and a building site where the XS lab had been. Sisheng University had been rewarded for its trust in him with six months of notoriety.

And, after all their kindness, he was secretly dating their nephew.

He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I’m assuming that if I were to refuse… the Heads of Department would put it to a vote?”

“I told them to let me tell you. And that you’d take it. There’s no *shame* in it, Yuheng. Please, you have to see that.” Xue Zhengyong rubbed his temple. When had he started to look his age?

When he had to babysit a liability of a professor, loathed by the government he had to work with.

What a way to repay them for all their kindness.

Chu Wanning felt like the worst scum in the world.

“A year,” he said, staring down at his empty plate. “What about Xue Meng?”

“It’s leave from teaching and departmental duties.” *Out of sight, out of mind*. “You can still supervise him. He’d never forgive us if we suggested otherwise.”

He nodded. “And I…” He nearly asked if he would have a job to come back to, but he wouldn’t do that to them. He wouldn’t make these good, kind people promise something that they might have to take back when they found out that he was running around in secret with their nephew. He closed his eyes, and nodded again.

“Good. *Good.* You won’t want to come back afterwards, you know! You teach too many classes anyway – and all those resits you make them do – you’ll have some time to actually write a paper. Or a book! And you’ve still got to visit Hangzhou, remember?”

Ah, yes. The hotel stay that the Xues had bought for him. He felt so hurt, so small and alone, and the fact that he had no right to feel that way made him feel sick with guilt as well.

Wang Chuqing squeezed his hand. “Darling, we’re sorry. We know. And thank you for- for understanding. It’s all just a little delicate, with the police in Ya’an having found nothing about the bomb; they’re taking it personally, as though you’re deliberately showing them up or something, and obviously they and the Party are hand in glove and…”

“I know,” Chu Wanning said. He opened his eyes and achieved a watery smile. “I do understand. I’ve hardly… Hardly brought glory to Sisheng.”

“Of course you have. And you will with whatever you write on leave, I can’t wait to read it!” Xue Zhengyong said, with aggressive enthusiasm. That was how he was covering up his own shame, Chu Wanning suddenly realised – Xue Zhengyong was *ashamed*, at having to bow to the wishes of the other Heads of Department and, presumably, to the Party officials affiliated with the University.

Chu Wanning swallowed his own hurt along with the rest of the wine in his glass. “Give me a chance to write it, first. Maybe I could revisit the ZND detonation model and the von Neumann spike.”

Xue Zhengyong laughed uproariously in relief. “That could certainly be… explosive!”

“Oh, *stop,*” Wang Chuqing said.

“It might be, or it could bomb,” Chu Wanning offered.

“I’m sure you’ll give it your blast touch.”

“Weak, I’m really not blown away by that one.” Chu Wanning stood up. “I’m just going to the bathroom.”

“Go, go, I’ve already covered this,” Xue Zhengyong said. “Technically it was a work meeting, wasn’t it? Ha!”

Chu Wanning managed to keep a pleasant smile on his face until he reached the privacy of the bathroom. He leant on the sink and stared at his reflection.

His reflection, like a skull, stared back at him.

Hardly the image the other Heads of Department would want associated with their university.

What the hell was Mo Ran thinking?

That thought nearly undid him, but he managed to escape the end of the conversation without humiliating himself, and walked into the night as though he really didn’t mind. Just surprised, initially. Wasted a few hours on his induction lecture. Still, it’d hold for another year, right?

His feet carried him past his own front door, and with a growing ache in his chest, he realised that he was aiming for Mo Ran’s flat instead. To tell him. Of course. No other reason. Just to let him know.

And there Mo Ran was, fresh from the shower after his session at the gym, all damp hair and clean t-shirt and the smell of soap.

The sight of him made Chu Wanning cross his arms and grip his own shoulders.

He was so beautiful. So perfect and so… untouched. He'd endured so much, and as Chu Wanning slowly crumbled inwards, Mo Ran just seemed to grow more and more kind, more and more confident.

He shouldn't have come.

"Hey, hey, hey," Mo Ran said, voice suddenly so gentle. Chu Wanning could have sworn his expression hadn't changed – indeed, his muscles ached from *ensuring* nothing showed on his face – but somehow Mo Ran could see right to the core of him anyway, past his porcelain mask. "What's up? Come here."

Mo Ran pulled him into his flat and into his arms in a single movement, kicking the door closed. Chu Wanning gripped himself bruisingly hard, standing rigid, back ramrod straight. Mo Ran didn't seem bothered by it; he just hugged Chu Wanning tighter, and cupped the back of his head with his hand.

"What is it? What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Shouldn't have come," Chu Wanning gritted out. But he turned his face, and pressed his stinging eyes into the crook of Mo Ran's neck. He was wearing some kind of necklace himself, and the silver chain rubbed against his cheekbone.

"Of course you should have." Mo Ran rocked them, just a little, side to side. "That's why I'm here."

Chapter 46: Myriad Stars Around the Moon

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for your pateince, everyone! ❤️ I was away on holiday, and then I received news that after two years on the waiting list, I have my own autism assessment this week. I am one part excited and four parts terrified, but I am comforting and distracting myself by thinking about the chapters to come...!

Chu Wanning tried to be philosophical as he unpacked his office supplies. He *would* write a book, he decided; he hadn't in years, only papers, and now it was a decision as to whether it would be a monograph or a textbook.

But he was grateful nonetheless for the distractions Mo Ran kindly provided. They began hiking in nearby Hailuogou National Park, before the weather turned too cold, with Mo Ran's excellent packed lunches – once to see the glacier, and once to walk in the forest.

Thankfully, he did not suggest a visit to the hot springs. Chu Wanning didn't think he'd be able to cope with that.

The third time, Xue Meng asked why they kept spending the weekend together, and invited himself along. His idea of hiking was much more competitive than idling along holding hands, so Mo Ran picked a punishing mountain route.

"Sorry," he whispered to Chu Wanning at one point, when Xue Meng was well in front of them.

"For what?" Chu Wanning quirked a smile at him. "Sorry you can't keep up?"

"Sorry to leave you choking on my dust."

“Sorry your cousin’s so far ahead of you,” Chu Wanning said, and began to jog. “Come on!”

The end of September brought the Mid-Autumn Festival, and a gilded invitation bearing the blue sky and silver heron of Rufeng University.

The President and Party Secretary of Rufeng University request the pleasure of the company of

DR CHU WANNING AND GUEST

To celebrate the centenary of our founding on Friday the 3rd of November 2023.

Location: President’s Lodgings, Jiaoshan College, Rufeng University, Linyi, Shandong Province

Champagne reception at 7pm

Dinner and speeches at 8:30 pm

Carriages at midnight

Dress code: Black tie

Chu Wanning’s eyes skimmed over the gilt lettering, and then rolled up and around; he crumpled the tastefully thick card and tossed it in the vague direction of the dustbin. He couldn’t think of any event he would like to attend less than one in the President’s Lodgings of Rufeng, where former President Nangong Liu would inevitably be holding court for the great and good of Chinese academia.

He put it from his mind. Today he was invited to the Xues to celebrate Mid-Autumn with them. Xue Zhengyong, Xue Meng, and Mo Ran were all spending the day delivering mooncakes to all the members of staff at Sisheng, but Wang Chuqing had invited him to make homemade mooncakes with her for the meal that evening.

His suspicion was that it was an additional (but unnecessary) olive branch being offered after the enforced sabbatical, though perhaps there was an element of motherly kindness in it. He had never made mooncakes before.

This lack of experience swiftly became obvious, but Wang Chuqing was nothing if not generous with her time.

“So, Xue Meng prefers the pastry made with golden syrup, but *laogong* prefers it with honey, so I make two batches of dough,” Wang Chuqing explained.

“What’s the difference?”

“The honey pastry is sweeter, but lighter in colour and less soft. But if you’re making it with golden syrup, you have to add lye water to neutralise the acid in the syrup.”

“Ah, but the honey is less acidic?” Chu Wanning said.

“Exactly. It’s all just chemistry,” she said with a smile. “A little like pharmaceutical production, but more enjoyable, at the end of the day. Now we add the flour, and use the whisk to make the dough – you try it.”

It was surprisingly hard at first, but after a few stirs with the metal whisk, the mixture began to adhere. Chu Wanning’s arm ached by the time Wang Chuqing said it was the right consistency, when she covered it with clingfilm and placed it in the fridge. They then did the same with the honey dough.

Making the salted egg yolk and lotus paste filling was more complicated, so Wang Chuqing gave him responsibility for the red bean paste instead. Chu Wanning enjoyed little more than watching an expert at work, and cooking was something that had never come naturally to him. He could now make a handful of dishes, but anything complicated involving baking was beyond him.

“Now, we need to let that stand for a few minutes, and then we can put them together,” Wang Chuqing said. “Pour us some cassia wine? I think we deserve it.”

The osmanthus wine was sweet and golden, and Chu Wanning sat down at the table as Wang Chuqing directed.

“Now,” Wang Chuqing said. “Before I say anything else, I would like to ask when this thing between you and Mo Ran began.”

Chu Wanning didn’t drop his glass or spill his wine. He put it down, very carefully. His face like a mask.

It was the decision of an instant not to lie – he was no good at it, and hated the thought of deceiving his old friend. And beneath the horror, the fear and the despair, there was… relief.

He bowed his head. “My birthday.”

The relief of being found out might have been kind, but the embarrassment of remembering that night was like fire.

“You had a bruise on your head the next morning,” Wang Chuqing said, and there was a line of worry between her eyebrows.

Did she think that Chu Wanning had tried to- to *force* himself on Mo Ran? That he’d bruised Chu Wanning’s face in self-defence?

“It was my fault,” he said immediately. “After you went to bed, he said that he… That he. Um. Liked. Liked me. But I was… I ran, you see. Stupid. But it was dark, and I ran into one of your fruit trees.”

The line deepened. “And then what happened?”

“I…” The sweetness of the cassia wine felt like a mistake now. “I went to his flat, to say that… That we shouldn’t. Do anything. That I was- that I wasn’t *rejecting* him, because I do- I actually… I’m saying this all wrong.”

“You’re fine.” Wang Chuqing said. “Just tell me.”

“I really did mean to tell him no. But then he asked me if I’d go on a date with him, and I…” He closed his eyes. “I know that it was wrong. I know I should have said no.”

“Why did you say ‘yes’, then?”

“Because I…” His heart was finally going to give out; it had endured too much abuse for too long. Mo Ran’s smile, his dimples, his kisses dropped onto Chu Wanning’s hands and hair… “Because I like him too.”

He inhaled and opened his eyes. “I will of course resign from Sisheng.”

Wang Chuqing’s face was impassive. “Why?”

“I’m dating a student. It's inappropriate.”

“A former student. Mo Ran graduated. And his decision not to pursue the doctorate now makes even more sense…”

The suspense was unbearable; Chu Wanning was stoic and had a spine of steel, except when it came to human relationships. “Please, Chuqing, please just- I know that I can never apologise enough, that I can never expect your forgiveness-”

“Wanning.” Chuqing reached across the table and took his hand. “What forgiveness? You’ve done nothing that needs forgiveness. It’s *you* that I’m worried about.”

He looked down at their joined hands in shock. “*Me*? Why?”

“I love Mo Ran, you know I do, but we both know that he can be impulsive… Temperamental. Did he coerce you into this? Has he made you feel uncomfortable?”

“What? No!”

“You said that you ran into a tree to get away from him, darling.”

“No, it was- It was just too much, I’d never expected – never *thought* – no one had ever said anything like that to me before, and I couldn’t- it all just felt too much, I could feel it too much. It wasn’t his fault.”

“And when you tried to say no to him, you ended up going on a date instead...”

“But that was because- I’ve said this all wrong. He’d been so-he’s been the kindest- Chuqing, I, I like him. I really… I. More than that.”

She was still staring at him with an expression of… concern. But she was concerned for *him*?

This, he had never anticipated. He had thought that if it ever came to light, he’d be slapped and thrown out of the house. He’d not expected for his hand to be held. The unexpectedness of Wang Chuqing’s response threatened to undo him; he wanted to run again, fruit trees be damned.

“First,” she said, squeezing his hand, “you’ve been scrupulously appropriate, with both the boys. I know that. Going out with a former student; Wanning, I don’t see anything wrong with that. With a current student, yes, because you would have a measure of power over him,

but right now… Mo Ran is the one with a family and support. He's the one whose family has power over *your* job. If it's inappropriate, it's because *Mo Ran* shouldn't have put *you* in that position, not the other way around."

It felt as though the laws of nature had all been broken. Gravity gave way to chaotic electromagnetism; Chu Wanning was surprised that the sky didn't darken and the glasses float off the table.

"I don't… But I…"

"You're vulnerable in so many ways. Not just the police and the government, but *you*… Let's just say that Mo Ran has a lot more experience in this kind of thing, hm?"

Chu Wanning shook his head. "I'm older than him…"

Wang Chuqing scoffed. "Not by much. And age isn't experience, especially not in something like this."

"But I-" *He hadn't expected this.* All his nightmares of discovery, of public denunciation and ostracism, homophobic slurs and the end of his career and arrests and news segments and crushing isolation, and the one thing he had never predicted was Wang Chuqing's soft voice, her warm hand.

It was a good thing that Wang Chuqing wasn't an interrogator for the Ministry of State Security. She'd have broken him instantly.

Used as he was to hatred, the kindness felt like agony. His eyes stung, without warning; panic inflated in his lungs like a pufferfish, blocking his breathing and pricking his insides.

His breath hitched, and all the tension of the last few months welled up in him – the tension of Shanghai, the train, Yuliang, his arrest. The confession. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Chuqing, I'm sorry-"

“*Xu*, sweetheart, sweetheart, no,” Wang Chuqing said. “You’ve done nothing wrong. Poor darling. It’s *you* I’m worried about. He’s our nephew, but you’re our friend too, and both Zhengyong and I feel that we have a responsibility for your well-being as well. I just want you to know that if this doesn’t work out, if you didn’t want to go out with him, you would still be welcome here. We'd work it out.”

“I do,” he whispered. “I do, though.”

Wang Chuqing laid her hand on his hair in benediction, then topped up their glasses. “Take a drink of that. Go on.”

Chu Wanning wiped his face, mortified beyond words, and downed the glass in one go. She smiled and topped it up again. “Now. There’s no need for apologies, okay?”

“Mn.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” She sipped her own wine. “I knew it from the way he was looking at you, at your birthday. And you’ve been spending so much time together… It’s been good for him. He’s changed so much in the last six months, and he’s… happy. Not drinking so much, not going out to those horrible clubs… Not so angry. He’s always had this anger in him, underneath. But he also has so much passion. So much affection. If you’re both happy, then I truly think you could be very good for each other.”

“Even if we’re… Chuqing. We’re both men.”

“What?!” She grinned. Then she nodded. “I know, I know. It’s difficult, especially at the moment, with the government being so… But we’ve known about Mo Ran for a long time. And… Well. You’ve… never had a girlfriend. So it’s not a vast surprise.”

Chu Wanning’s ears burnt and he stared down at the table. “I’ve been busy – and I’d not drag a girlfriend through all the trials and the arrests – not that I’d drag Mo Ran into-! I mean, after the bomb especially, but he knows now-”

“He knows, and he’s an adult.” She smiled at him. “A very stubborn adult. Who, as you say, now has a more accurate understanding of what you’ve been dealing with as well. No, your both being men... I’m not easily scandalised. I caused some scandal in my time as well, you know. And… well, I think it would surprise you how few relationships or families are truly conventional. There’s always things unsaid, things that are unexpected or unusual. *Our* family…” She looked at Chu Wanning. “And that’s what I’ll remind my husband.”

Chu Wanning inhaled shakily. “He won’t like it.”

“Maybe not at first. He’s a man of his generation. But I’ll talk to him tomorrow. I think in time he’ll be over the moon, to have you as part of the family. The problem will be Xue Meng…”

Chu Wanning buried his head in his hands.

*

By the time that Mo Ran got back to the house he’d delivered thirty-seven boxes of mooncakes. He got in just after Xue Zhengyong, and jostled with Xue Meng for the right to go up the driveway first.

The mooncakes were in the oven, so Mo Ran immediately went in to cook his own speciality. The duck had been marinating in a mixture of baijiu and choujiu with pepper, ginger, garlic, and salt since he left at the crack of dawn, so it was now ready to be blanched, dried, then smoked on the tea- and camphor-leaves.

It was a complicated dish and the timings were crucial, so it meant that Mo Ran didn't have the time to speak to Chu Wanning alone before they ate.

Wang Chuqing was being particularly chummy with him tonight, taking a more active role in the conversations than she usually did, sitting next to him and topping up his cassia wine with plenty of warm smiles. Chu Wanning, on the other hand, kept darting anxious sidelong glances back at her.

Was it about the sabbatical decision? No, Mo Ran didn't think so. Something had happened during the baking session.

They ate dinner in the garden, under the light of the full moon. There was baked duck and their hand-made mooncakes – Chu Wanning blushed to the roots of his hair when Mo Ran asked which ones he had made, so that he could taste one – but also plenty of nuts, walnuts and peanuts and buffalo nuts, a dish of pork and taro, crab with scallion and ginger, Longjing tea, and the pomelos which Chu Wanning had brought with him. Xue Zhengyong, of course, was a master of peeling them, and wore the resulting 'hat' for the rest of the night.

"I might go for a walk in the garden," Mo Ran said, as the hour approached midnight and the dinner was winding down.

Chu Wanning was piling up empty plates. "I think I'll go straight to bed." He risked a second of eye contact with Mo Ran and minutely shook his head.

Mo Ran didn't press it. Not until an hour later, when Chu Wanning was beginning to doze off, and Mo Ran crept into his room.

"You didn't forget your Cica-care sheets, did you?" Mo Ran said with a grin. He closed the door behind him. "Come on, come in the garden with me."

"Why?" Chu Wanning said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

He looked so cute, with his usually perfect hair falling around his face like a sleepy dark waterfall, phoenix eyes blinking in the darkness, cheeks tinged with pink from the warmth under the covers. Mo Ran wished he could see where else he was pink with warmth… "You know. Mid-Autumn, full moon… It's romantic."

Chu Wanning shook his head and flapped his hand to beckon him. "Come in, come in closer."

Mo Ran's face lit up. "If you insist…"

"No! Your aunt knows."

Mo Ran felt as though he'd missed a step in the dark. Suddenly Chu Wanning's anxiety at dinner made perfect sense. "*Shit*. What did she say? Did you tell her?" he asked, careful to make sure there was no accusation in his tone.

Chu Wanning shook his head. "She'd figured it out. But I couldn't to lie to her. I'm sorry."

"No, no, of course not…" Mo Ran perched on the end of the bed. "But at dinner she seemed…"

"She said that if we were both happy with it, then she didn't think it was wrong." Chu Wanning's voice was quiet. "She said that even if… if it didn't work out, I didn't have to worry about my job or not being friends anymore."

Mo Ran blinked. He'd never even thought about that – that if there was an acrimonious break-up, one could reasonably expect Xue Zhengyong to side with his relative over his employee. "Does Uncle know?"

"Not yet. Chuqing said that she'd warm him up to the idea, take it slowly… She said that they already know that you're, um, and they thought that… I haven't had a girlfriend, but I

don’t know what that has to do with anything.”

Mo Ran decided to leave that discussion for another time; he suspected that the ‘lack of girlfriend’ reasoning was Wang Chuqing trying to be diplomatic.

“I’ll talk to her tomorrow,” he promised, abandoning his idea of kissing under the moonlight – he’d learnt about what Chu Wanning was liable to do when spooked and pushed too quickly in that garden. He settled for a quick kiss on the cheek instead, and stood up. “I’ll come round tomorrow night and let you know how it goes, okay? But let me do your care sheets first.”

The next day, Wang Chuqing seemed to be expecting his desire to talk; with perfect social nimbleness she managed to have Xue Meng drop Chu Wanning home and Xue Zhengyong off on his Saturday morning run at the same time while they stored leftovers and cleaned the kitchen.

“You be careful with him,” she began softly. “Very careful, Ran’er.”

Mo Ran sighed; it was a relief to finally be able to talk about it. “I will.”

“He’s vulnerable. Not just because of the police or the government or the press.”

“Or Uncle and his job.”

“Or us being his only friends. You’re our *family* –” The flash of guilt, white-hot, the acrid taste of fear in this back of his throat. “– you’ll always have us, but he doesn’t have anyone else. If we don’t invite him, he drinks alone through festivals. If you two break up down the line, he’d expect us to cut off contact with him. We won’t, but he’d be perfectly reasonable to think it.”

“I know, Auntie, I know. You look after him. I want to look after him too.”

“It’s like trying to look after an angry cat sometimes,” she said affectionately. “But I’m glad. Glad you’ve changed your mind. You didn’t like him for so long… And you liked your friend, Shi Mei. When he had to leave, we were worried that you blamed Wanning for it…”

Mo Ran swallowed painfully. “I did. For a little bit. Then I realised I was being stupid. And without Shi Mei there I got to know him better again, and… I was a moron. I was just being a little bitch because he pushed me, and I was too lazy to appreciate it.”

“Hm. And Shi Mei was… There were other things going on then.”

“I gathered that,” he said delicately. Remembering that night in the hospital and Xue Meng’s violent, devastated outburst was not a road he wanted to go down right now. “But we really did become friends. We chatted while he was in Shanghai, and then we got stuck in Yuliang, and I realised that I liked him. I asked him out on his birthday. It was all me.”

“And he ran into a tree because he was so overwhelmed.” Wang Chuqing put down the tea towel and went to take Mo Ran’s arms. She had to crane her neck to look up at him, being a full foot shorter. “That’s what I mean, sweetheart. You have so much affection in you, but you’re like a big dog sometimes, bounding around. And Chu Wanning…”

“Is an angry cat, like you said,” Mo Ran agreed. “He’s not like Veggiebun. But yeah, I… I have realised that. I’m being very careful.”

“Good. I must say, I’d rather you be with him than go out to those horrible nightclubs with heaven-only-knows…” She reached up to cup his cheek. “I’ll talk to *laogong* for you both.”

He bent down to hug her. “Thank you.”

Chapter 47: No Kinder Sign of Love

Chapter Notes

> This chapter was a MENACE, but it reached a point where I just had to post it, because I was never going to think it was okay. I will catch up on replying to all your kind and lovely comments tomorrow, but right now I am shattered - for the last few hours I've been singing "I am going to publish this tonight if it kills me" to the tune of 'The Year' by The Mountain Goats.
>
> (And for those of you who wished me luck for my assessment, thank you so much, you are so, so sweet. 😭♥ It went well, I think - I was SO nervous, and the ADOS was weird as hell, but hey-ho! Results in two to four weeks, ahhhh, terror, so I'm VERY excited for some distraction, that this is the last emotions and romance chapter, and now we're swinging back into the plot and peril of the Rufeng Arc. 😈)

It was two agonising days before Xue Zhengyong rang. Chu Wanning knew that Wang Chuqing was looking for the right time, rather than it taking that long for Xue Zhengyong to calm down; unlike Chu Wanning and his touchpaper temper, he was slow to anger, phlegmatic and understanding.

He reminded himself of this every hour, but it did little to lessen his anxiety. When his phone finally rang, he nearly threw it out of the window.

“Yuheng! You sly dog, I’d never have thought you had it in you!”

Chu Wanning clutched the phone with both hands. “Zhengyong. I’m… sorry I didn’t tell you myself.”

“No, no, no, it’s fine. For the best, really – I was a bit, well, surprised! I asked Wifey some questions that she said were ‘offensive’, I don’t know, but she gave me what-for, so. I mean, we knew about Mo Ran – hard not to, ha! Never was discreet. But you, I didn’t realise you were a glass. Oh, shit, I think that’s one of the words Wifey said I shouldn’t use – what’s the right word?”

“I don’t know,” Chu Wanning said helplessly.

“Anyway, a *gay*,” he said, settling on the English. “Not that I mind! Don’t mind at all. And I know you’ll be good to my nephew. No, better to let Wifey tell me.” Xue Zhengyong laughed. “No, no, actually! I’m very angry. Very hurt, very angry, very offended. But do you know how you could make it up to me?”

Chu Wanning frowned; usually he was able to follow Xue Zhengyong’s jumps of thought, but he was nervous and this time it eluded him. “What?”

“You can make it up to me with karaoke. We haven’t gone to a karaoke bar in ages.”

“No.”

“Yuheng! You have to. Or I won’t forgive you.”

Chu Wanning sighed, but the knot in his chest was beginning to loosen. “I’ll go out drinking. But no karaoke.”

“That’s my condition. Karaoke or nothing. I’m so hurt, Yuheng, and then Wifey told me off! I’m betrayed on all sides, attacked on every front. Karaoke’s the only thing that’ll cheer me up.”

“Fine. I’ll come. But I won’t sing.”

“You have to sing! I can’t sing on my own, what’ll I look like? No. You have to sing.”

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. “Just us?”

Xue Zhengyong laughed, knowing that he'd won. "Just us! No witnesses, I promise! I'll book a room in Haoledi. Are you sure you don't want the boys to come?"

"Absolutely *not*."

"Don't want to embarrass yourself in front of Mo Ran? Ha! You haven't seen him try to sing Teresa Teng. But no, no, just us – we'll sing that 'Chengdu' song like last time, haha! I'll book for nine, meet me at Haoledi."

"Okay," Chu Wanning said. He nearly thanked Xue Zhengyong, but something stopped him. Xue Zhengyong was clearly trying hard for things to be as *normal* as possible, just like he had after the conversation about the sabbatical. "Gives me time to buy some earplugs."

"So rude! See you later!"

It was the next day, Chu Wanning nursing a mild but exceptionally rare hangover, that Mo Ran came around unexpectedly to his flat. He could hear him talking outside the door – presumably to Zhang Xinyi, the other person on his floor, a woman in her early seventies who often joined him in the morning at the People's Park.

His guess was confirmed when he opened the door; Zhang Xinyi was opening her door, while Mo Ran stood by with laden shopping bags.

"Ah, your friend is so kind, Xiao Chu!" she said to him with a smile. "And so *strong*!"

"Aiyo, thank you, Auntie," Mo Ran said with a grin.

"No, really! Look at those muscles. If I were a young woman, I'd not say 'no' to your slippers under my bed."

"Auntie, you're embarrassing him!" Chu Wanning said, glaring at Mo Ran.

“I’d not kick him out of bed for eating cakes, ha!” she said, blithely ignoring him. “I’d not-”

“You’re too kind, Auntie – here’s your shopping,” Mo Ran said, and ducked behind Chu Wanning to escape.

Zhang Xinyi winked at Chu Wanning. “You’ve done very well there.”

“He’s my *friend*.”

“A *very* good friend.”

“Stop. You are a menace.”

“I’m harmless. I’m helping!”

“You’re most emphatically *not*,” Chu Wanning said, but his stern expression was betrayed twice over by his blush and the quirk of his mouth. “I’ll call the police on you.”

“Ask them to send some of the nice young ones,” Zhang Xinyi said, laughing. “Enjoy your evening – but not too much, or you’ll miss tai chi again!”

Chu Wanning slammed the door shut, and pointed at Mo Ran, paralysed in a silent paroxysm of laughter. “And you, stop encouraging her!”

“Blaming the victim? Not my fault I get sexually harassed every time I come round to your flat.” Mo Ran grinned, and looked him up and down. “By the wrong person, mind you…”

Chu Wanning swatted his shoulder. "'Harassment' by definition means it's unwanted; wanted harassment is a paradox."

"I like a paradox now and again," Mo Ran said, but his smile as fading. "I've, ah, got bad news."

Chu Wanning was instantly on alert. "What is it? What's happened?"

"Nothing, nothing bad – sort of – good, in one sense. Uncle asked around the company if anyone would mind letting me shadow for a while, and someone's taken the bait. Building a new primary school."

Chu Wanning frowned. "But that's excellent news…?"

"It's in Liangshan, though. Three weeks, while they're beginning the construction and laying the foundations."

Liangshan, the mountainous region in the south of Sichuan. Three or four hours' drive on the main roads, and then who-knows how many to some of the mountain villages. There was no way Mo Ran could make the drive daily, and even weekly would be pushing it.

"When do you leave?"

Mo Ran looked stricken. "Tonight."

"Tonight?"

"I mean, right now, basically. My bag's in the car downstairs. As soon as the guy rings with the address I have to go; I start work in the morning."

Chu Wanning gave what he hoped would be a reassuring smile. The future gaped like an abyss. “It’ll fly by. You’ll be so busy. And I was going to be away for a week anyway.”

“But it means I won't be here when you get back from Shanghai...” Mo Ran said, referring to Chu Wanning's scheduled three-month check.

“Doing something far more important. I'll be fine.”

“Yeah…” Mo Ran’s gaze had drifted down to Chu Wanning’s chest. “Um. Silly question. You know that necklace I gave you…?”

Chu Wanning bit his lip. Did he… want it back? He drew the chain out from under his top, fear stirring in his stomach, and Mo Ran relaxed into a smile.

“Do you want it?”

“No, no. I mean, yes. I mean, *that* one’s yours, but… how would you feel if I had a matching one?”

“Oh!” Chu Wanning felt the heat rising up his neck. The idea of Mo Ran, wearing a matching necklace to his – like a promise, something that he could touch and wonder whether Mo Ran was touching his necklace at the same moment, something hidden but tangible… “Mn.”

Mo Ran’s eyes were shining. “That’d be all right?” he said in what Chu Wanning could now identify as his ‘teasing’ voice.

“Whatever,” he replied with a glare, and Mo Ran laughed.

“That’s good,” he said, and drew his own necklace out of his shirt. “Because I already got one.”

Chu Wanning stepped closer to look at the stone. “How did you…? It’s *exactly* the same colour.”

“Well, er…” Mo Ran rubbed the back of his neck. “Your one was actually part of a pair. They’re carved from the same stone…”

Chu Wanning’s heart fluttered dangerously. *Part of a pair, carved from the same stone…* “She still had the other one?”

“No, I bought both of them at the same time,” Mo Ran said. “I’ve actually been wearing it…”

“And now you ask permission?!” Chu Wanning said, because feigning anger felt so much easier than feeling overwhelmed with love. “What if I’d said no?”

“Then it’d be my secret,” Mo Ran said. He put his arms around Chu Wanning. “But I’m glad you said yes.”

“I rescind my permission.”

“Nooooo,” Mo Ran said. Chu Wanning could feel the laughter in his chest.

“Pure presumption. You’re completely incorrigible.”

“I am, I am,” he replied, and proved it by kissing Chu Wanning’s ear. “Though, you could always *try* to correct me…”

“Mo Ran!”

“Is Shizun sensitive there?” Mo Ran asked wickedly. “You have a tiny mole, just behind your ear…”

“Stop it!” He swatted at the side of Mo Ran’s head.

Mo Ran nuzzled the spot, and Chu Wanning writhed. “You’re so cute. How am I going to go without seeing my baobei for so long?”

“Your *what*?” he said, outrage not entirely put on, but Mo Ran’s body was like a furnace, and he couldn’t help but press himself to the long, firm length of it.

“My baobei little cabbage.”

“I’m going to kill you.” Chu Wanning tried to pry Mo Ran’s arms away, and Mo Ran caught his wrist instead.

“You could try.” There was something new in Mo Ran’s voice, a new deep hum that seemed to run down Chu Wanning’s spine and pool behind his hips. The feeling only intensified when he failed to wrench his wrist free. He looked up, and Mo Ran’s eyes were black, fixed on him with a predator’s intensity.

“Go on,” he growled. “*Try*.”

Chu Wanning’s hips bucked of their own accord, wanting to be *closer*; with his free hand he reached up and fisted it in Mo Ran’s hair. Mo Ran inhaled sharply and bared his teeth in a grin, teeth as white and sharp as a wolf’s, and Chu Wanning’s knees felt weak. All he could see were those eyes; all he could feel was Mo Ran’s arm like iron around him, and tight heat stirred-

Mo Ran’s phone rang from the pocket of his jeans. The vibration shot right through Chu Wanning’s crotch and he yelped; Mo Ran sprang away from him as though he’d been electrocuted.

“Fuck!” Mo Ran fumbled with his phone, trying to get it out of his pocket, while Chu Wanning fled around the kitchen counter.

His spine and legs were as soft as his penis was hard. He could taste iron, like blood, or the air before a storm, and he couldn’t seem to get enough oxygen.

“I’m sorry,” Mo Ran said. He’d gone white. “Shit, I’m- I’m sorry.”

He was sorry. Mo Ran was sorry. The arousal was indistinguishable from nausea. “Why?” he snapped.

Mo Ran gave up on answering the phone. It buzzed between them on the polished counter. “Are you…? I didn’t mean to… I should answer this…”

“Yes. You should. Go.”

The phone stopped ringing.

“Are you angry?” Mo Ran said, now looking less like a hungry wolf and more like a kicked puppy.

“For what? Of course I’m not!” Chu Wanning said angrily. It was a lie, obviously – he was furious, but at himself, not Mo Ran.

Why had *that*, of all things, been so powerful, so irresistible? Why would a feeling of passivity and helplessness *arouse* him?

He thought of Shi Mingjing, that awful afternoon when *he* had… But Chu Wanning hadn’t reacted like this. He’d frozen in furious horror, not melted and pressed and-

He was disgusting. He had discovered a new depth to his utter depravity. Chu Wanning had been helpless before, and he *knew* it was something sickening, something to be fled and rejected at every turn, and yet when it was *Mo Ran* his body had responded to the mere suggestion of it like…

He didn't understand it, and what he didn't understand infuriated him.

Mo Ran was looking anywhere but at Chu Wanning. "I'd better ring him back. It'll be about…"

"When he expects you." The warmth in his pelvis was congealing into something heavy and stomach-churning.

Mo Ran was about to leave for three weeks, and Chu Wanning had ruined it. Ruined everything.

He barrelled back around the counter and shoved himself against Mo Ran. He turned to the side, so that Mo Ran couldn't feel the hard evidence of his perversion, but buried his face in his shoulder instead, twisting like a snake.

Mo Ran gave a shuddering sigh and wrapped his arms around him again. "I'm sorry."

"For what? You didn't do anything. Idiot."

"I scared you…"

"I wasn't *scared*. I told you to stop being such an idiot. I just…" Mo Ran was wearing his leather jacket again, and Chu Wanning wrung the back of it.

“It’s shit,” Mo Ran agreed. “I could say I can’t make it…”

“I *literally* just told you to stop being an idiot! Of course you have to go. Do you think I’d hold you back like that? If you don’t call him back, I’ll kill you,” Chu Wanning said. He should probably back up his threat by letting go, but… But not yet.

“I’ll text you every day,” Mo Ran said against his hair. “All the time.”

“Don’t,” Chu Wanning said, then realised how harsh it sounded. “Not because... I would like that. But please, don’t. Any messages can be downloaded and used as evidence in court. I never message anything without imagining it being read in front of a judge...”

He pulled back just enough to look up. Mo Ran’s expression contained the implication that he had never had this concern before.

Chu Wanning gave a crooked smile, aware that within minutes he’d destroyed their last evening. “I just don’t want you to be dragged into anything.”

“No, I get it,” Mo Ran said, brave and morose.

“Maybe there’ll be phone coverage. It’ll be like when I was in Shanghai.”

“Yeah. Yeah. We’ll probably be able to talk on the phone…”

Mo Ran’s mobile rang again, making both of them jump. They parted more slowly this time. “I should…” Mo Ran said, and stepped out into the corridor when Chu Wanning nodded. “Hi, Mr Deng, I’m so sorry, I was driving!”

Chu Wanning leant on the counter to stop his hands from trembling. Three weeks. Three weeks, and he couldn’t even… But he’d worn a mask for too long, worn the iron shackles of

repression, and he couldn't seem to break them off. Not even to tell Mo Ran how much he was going to miss him.

How much he loved him.

The idea made him cringe – either saying the words out loud, or writing them in a note, like Mo Ran had so courageously done. No. Chu Wanning was weak and a coward in comparison.

He looked at the front door, and was struck by an idea. He rummaged through one of the drawers for paper.

"It's Luojishan," Mo Ran confirmed when he came back in. "I need to leave – it'll be six hours if the roads are clear."

"Mn," Chu Wanning said. He had sourced a carrier bag and was filling it with food from the fridge. "Take this. Everywhere will be closed by the time you get there, and you need dinner."

"Wanning…"

"And! And a book," he said, and hurried to his bookshelves. "Maybe two. If the signal's bad, you'll need… Which is the next fantasy one you wanted to borrow? Oh, have you read *Three-Body*? You'd like that. You should read that."

Mo Ran accepted the books with bemused acquiescence. "Um, if you think I-"

"And a bookmark," Chu Wanning said. "You… You need a bookmark." He handed him the piece of paper.

It was nothing like the brocade-backed scroll with its delicate painting and its painstaking calligraphy in Hui ink. It was just a piece of paper torn from a notebook, and the poem was

written out with the mechanical pencil Chu Wanning habitually kept in his pocket with his Leatherman and his milk sweets.

My feelings are deep, but I always seem heartless

I think alone behind my cup, but I can't smile

The candle has a heart and mourns our parting

In my place, it sheds tears until dawn

Chu Wanning watched Mo Ran's expression as he read. "It's by Du Mu," he said. "Not… Not Du Fu, this time."

Mo Ran's face looked very strange. Very soft, with his strong eyebrows drawn in. He put down the books and the piece of paper.

"I'm not very good," Chu Wanning said. At feelings, he meant. At speaking, at being a good friend or a good boyfriend. At being a human being. "I'm… I'm not good."

Mo Ran stepped to him again. "You're not good," he agreed. "You're the best. Best at everything. The best everything in the world."

Mo Ran was staring at his lips, and with a sudden jolt of terrifying comprehension, Chu Wanning realised that he was about to kiss him.

His first instinct was to freeze. To let it happen. But no, *no* – he was a *man*, he wasn't helpless, and he certainly wasn't passive. He was just as capable of this as Mo Ran, he could be just as brave.

Remembering Shi Minjing's abrupt, forceful press, he surged up.

His teeth clacked painfully against Mo Ran's lip, and his forehead met his nose before his own twisted in a lip-bruising, teeth-chipping approximation of a kiss.

"Ow! Son of a-!"

Chu Wanning staggered back in horror, pressing his hand to the space between his brows. Mo Ran was cupping his nose, and then checked to see whether it was bloodied.

He gaped, wordless. *Helpless*. What did he say? "I'm sorry-"

Stupid. Stupid, pathetic, ugly. He couldn't even *kiss* without hurting someone, and he couldn't even *explain*; Mo Ran didn't know what Shi Mingjing had tried, didn't know that Chu Wanning's only kiss had been an unexpected and terrifying thing, trapped between his student and a whiteboard. And now Mo Ran was going to be spending three weeks away in Liangshan, young and beautiful and alone, more than enough time to realise what a joke Chu Wanning was, how much better Mo Ran could do without so much as crooking his little finger, how Chu Wanning would never get better and would never be a proper boyfriend and would never-

"Hey," Mo Ran said, and suddenly Chu Wanning's world was enclosed in his large, warm hands; he cradled his jaw as though Chu Wanning's face was something precious.

Mo Ran's face didn't show anger, and there wasn't any blood. "Wanning…" he said, very tenderly, "Um. A kiss doesn't have to be like that, you know."

"I know," he replied, voice breaking. "I'm not- I'm-" But what could he say? Nothing.

"Determined," Mo Ran said with a gentle smile. "*Very* determined. But… Trust me, for a moment. Let me. Close your eyes."

Chu Wanning hated the idea of being *obedient*, but the idea of eye contact in this second was intolerable. He closed his eyes, trying not to shake, and then there was an electrifying brush

of skin against his lips.

"That's it," Mo Ran whispered, and Chu Wanning felt the heat of his breath, "remember to breathe," and he inhaled, and then Mo Ran was there again, with just a little more pressure this time-

"Force per unit area," he said, unconsciously, and then he felt Mo Ran *laugh* against his mouth.

"Mm-hm. More force, but more area," he said, and moved to press a kiss to the corner of Chu Wanning's mouth. "Is that a better distribution of pressure?"

"Mm," Chu Wanning managed to hum.

"Rather than too much pressure focused on the unit area of one nose," Mo Ran said, laughing again, and Chu Wanning pushed back, desperate to swallow that laughter. He was like a dying man finding water in the desert, like a dam breaking – the pressure that had been building for so many years found release against Mo Ran's lips; it was too much, and he had to use his hands as well, to claw against Mo Ran's ear and try to chase him down, to kiss more, to kiss deeper, to finally fill the cold and aching void in his chest with warmth and light.

Chapter 48: Lingering Loyalty

Mo Ran didn't leave for another two hours. He knew it would mean that he wouldn't get to Luojishan before midnight, but he quite frankly couldn't give a single, solitary fuck. After Chu Wanning's heart-breaking first attempt, he found the rhythm of kissing quite quickly – a prodigy, really, Mo Ran thought. And he reacted to Mo Ran so perfectly, so beautifully; it was really like the old adage, that kissing was like drinking salt water. The more you drank, the thirstier you became.

But eventually sense prevailed, and Chu Wanning threw Mo Ran out of his flat with his borrowed books and his bag of food. Mo Ran drove for hours in a daze, first ecstatic, but then with a creeping sense of fury.

Damn Shi Mei. Damn him to *hell*, he thought, rubbing his vaguely aching nose.

That was what Chu Wanning thought kissing was? Something forceful and painful?

Then the fury died, and the guilt rushed in. How could he damn Shi Mei, when he'd done something worse? Just because Chu Wanning didn't remember it, it didn't mean that it hadn't had an impact.

He was going to do better, he swore to himself. He was going to worship the ground Chu Wanning walked on. Chu Wanning was never going to feel like that *again*.

As difficult as the parting was, it had come at a good time. Xue Meng was finally flying off to America for the International Robotics Finals at Caltech, and Chu Wanning was off to Shanghai for his three-month review. The Xues dropped him at Chengdu train station on their way to the airport, and Chu Wanning messaged him that the journey was uneventful.

Should their messages ever be seized, Mo Ran hoped the Ministry of State Security were interested in trains, for their own shitty sakes, because if he wasn't head over heels in love with Chu Wanning the many, *many* pictures of train tracks and door mechanisms that he was expected to reply to might have killed him.

It hurt not to be able to say how much he loved him, how much he missed him. Mr Deng probably thought he was some *fuerdai* moron, given how stupid and distracted he was. They'd made vague plans for Chu Wanning to visit him halfway through, maybe at the end of the second week, but then the news came from Shanghai that the surgeons weren't happy with Chu Wanning's range of movement in his left arm, and they'd be operating again to try to extend it. They also wanted to do something to reduce inflammation around the glenoid, whatever the fuck that was – some lingering thing from the scapulectomy, Mo Ran gathered from Chu Wanning's brief, stoic message.

That night he couldn't bear their distant, cordial messages anymore. He took a photograph of the jianghu book, opened to a random page (he really had tried with *Three-Body*, but a large part of the plot seemed to revolve around physicists killing themselves, which, er, yeah, no), and laid the 'bookmark' on it so that its corner was clearly visible.

You were right about me bringing the book while I was away, he messaged. *Reading it is the first thing I do when I wake up and the last thing I do before I go to sleep. I even bring it to the construction site with me.*

His heart began to beat more quickly when he saw that Chu Wanning was typing a response.

That sounds unsafe. Don't be distracted.

He laughed. *Don't worry, I'm paying attention! Surgery tomorrow?*

Yes.

Once, he would have rolled his eyes at a message like that. Now it warmed him to his core, because it was just so… Wanning. Answering precisely the question that had been asked.

Hope it goes well, he texted. Very normal. What acquaintances or friends might say to each other. Rather than *If anything goes wrong I'm going to murder your surgeon.*

He glared at the ceiling. Stupid fucking surgeons.

Mo Ran was useless at work the next day, but at around nine o'clock that night he finally received a text message – a line of gibberish, the result of general anaesthetic on attempted mathematical equations, but in it he recognised the formula for calculating pressure, which made him pace around his room to burn off the joyful energy it gave him.

It meant that Chu Wanning was thinking about kissing.

By the end of the three weeks, he was counting down the seconds until he could leave. The work had been interesting and satisfying, and by the end Mr Deng seemed pleased with his progress, but there'd been no phone signal, and Mo Ran thought that if he didn't see or hear Chu Wanning soon, he was going to go insane.

Finally released, he drove through Liangshan like a madman, stopping only for a piss and a Eastroc Super Drink, knowing that Chu Wanning was on his own way back too.

They had wanted him to stay longer, to allow his shoulder to recover more, but Mo Ran gathered from Chu Wanning's daily handful of characters that he'd insisted on returning. With both Mo Ran and the Xues away, he had to rely on public transport: he could drive, but hadn't done so for years, as the conditions of his exit ban forbade him from owning or hiring a car.

He was on a bus from Chengdu to Shimian, where Mo Ran would meet him on his way north, and drive him the rest of the way. It was late, or it would have been tempting to stop by Yuliang. Mo Ran had a great fondness for that little village now, the seat of his epiphany.

Mo Ran spotted him standing at the Shimian bus station. Even travelling incognito, Mo Ran could spot Chu Wanning a mile away – it was like he was illuminated, or highlighted in dark ink. He shone in comparison to everything around him.

He was wearing a face-mask, and his hair was bundled up in a white woolly hat. He was also wearing his arm in a sling, which made Mo Ran's heart stutter.

Still, as besotted as he was, he wasn't a completely different person, so, bowing to the whims of the imp of the perverse, he pulled up alongside and rolled down his window.

"Damn, you're hot. How much for a quickie?"

"*Mo Ran!*" Chu Wanning let out a kind of whispered shriek that was pure music to Mo Ran's ears, and it was all he could do not to get out of the car, shove Chu Wanning over the hood, and have his wicked way with him.

Instead, he just grinned. "Couldn't resist. No, they're down there," he said, nodding along the road to a pair huddling together, wearing altogether too little for the November evening.

Mo Ran put Chu Wanning's bags in the boot, then went along to the two women, wearing his most disarming smile. "Evening, ladies. How much do you charge for an hour?"

"One-fifty," the older lady said, angling herself in front of the younger, and assessed the mark. "Each, if that's what you want."

Mo Ran handed her a five-hundred yuan note. "I'm not buying. But if you wanted to take an hour off, it's on me."

The older woman gave him a withering look. "We're not beggars."

"No, no, I know. My auntie was in the trade; I used to work in the kitchen of a house in Xiangtan. I have to drive my friend so I can't make you a meal, but it's cold. It's just in case you want to get in the warm for an hour without a loss. No strings attached."

She looked at him suspiciously but took the note. "Thanks."

“No problem,” Mo Ran said, with a nod to the younger lady, and turned around. He waved over his shoulder. “Be careful!”

“Always are.”

“They must be working for a right fucker,” Mo Ran explained as he got back in the car, “Making them solicit in this weather.”

Chu Wanning was staring at him, and Mo Ran felt a creeping sense of unease. It was something about his eyes, he realised with a jolt: phoenix eyes under a white woollen hat, looking at him a though he was the only person in the world. “It’s just because it’s cold – you know then they can sit inside for an hour and get something to eat without having to worry about justifying it later, they can say they had a john instead…”

Chu Wanning looked forward out of the windscreen, eyes scanning the road. Then he turned in his seat, pulled down his face-mask, and kissed Mo Ran.

He was anchoring himself in the twisted position with his right hand firmly clamped around the back of Mo Ran’s head; it gave their kiss a forcefulness, acting as they were against gravity. But it wasn’t enough. Mo Ran wanted to merge with Chu Wanning; he wanted to push himself against, *in*, until he couldn’t tell where one began and the other ended.

Maybe then, he’d be warm.

They broke apart when Chu Wanning made a slight noise of pain; twisting as he was, his left shoulder was digging into the seat.

Mo Ran blinked in a daze, a stupid grin on his face. Chu Wanning settled back, looking out of the windscreen again to see if there had been any witnesses.

He cleared his throat. “Well. Shall we get going?”

Mo Ran laughed. “Yes, sir.”

His lingering fantasies of reunion sex faded swiftly; Chu Wanning was trying his best to stay awake and listen to Mo Ran’s account of their time apart, but he must have been travelling since four or five in the morning, and Mo Ran knew that the painkillers made him sleepy. So he lowered the volume of his voice more and more, and then drove silently for the rest of the way to Wuchang, heart full of affection.

Then, as ever, the guilt seeped in, chilling him to the bone.

Chu Wanning had looked at him with those shining eyes because he’d watched him be kind to two prostitutes.

How could he ever say that he was kind to prostitutes because he’d killed three of them?

When they arrived in Wuchang, Mo Ran had to shake Chu Wanning awake (right shoulder, obviously), and guide him up the stairs, carrying his duffel bag and a paper bag with the clinic’s logo full of teas and food in his free hand. It made him think of the first night he’d climbed these stairs, hand in agony, Chu Wanning dazed and dizzy against his neck after they were mugged.

He’d thought then that if it had been anyone other than Chu Wanning cradled in his arm, it would have been cute. Now, he couldn’t even resist the urge to drop a discreet kiss onto his hair.

It was a good thing he *had* been discreet about it, because as they were fumbling for Chu Wanning’s keys, Zhang Xinyi opened the door of her flat. “Oh, you’re back!”

Chu Wanning mumbled a greeting, trying and failing to put the key in the lock. Mo Ran gave her a smile. “We are. But it’s been a long day, so-”

“Oh, I know, I know, I won’t keep you. But a young man came around to deliver this for Xiao Chu.” She held out an envelope.

That woke both of them up. It was a simple white envelope, addressed to *Chu Wanning*. No address. No postage marks. Delivered by hand.

“Did he give a name? What did he look like?” Chu Wanning asked.

“No name. Polite young man. About your friend’s age? He was wearing a face mask. He was shorter too… I’m sorry, I can’t remember anything else…”

“That’s okay, Auntie. Thank you. I’ll open this inside,” Chu Wanning said, and pointedly waited until Zhang Xinyi was back inside her own flat. He looked up at Mo Ran and pulled up his face-mask. “Stay here.”

“Fuck off.”

“I’m serious. Parcel rules apply.”

“It’s not a parcel.”

“Anthrax or ricin don’t need one. Open the door, then stand out in the corridor.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Open it inside. If there’s any powder, I’ll plug the door and call you. You’ll need to find someone.”

“Let me open it.”

“No.”

“Wanning-”

“It’s unlikely to be anything. If it was something like that, they wouldn’t hand-deliver it. But better to be safe.”

“Yeah, better to-”

Chu Wanning suddenly stepped inside and pulled the door closed; Mo Ran tried to stop him, but now that he was awake Chu Wanning was too fast for him.

Over the next thirty seconds, the longest thirty seconds of his life, the temperature of Mo Ran’s anger climbed higher and higher. When Chu Wanning opened the door again – “No powder, but-” – Mo Ran shoved him inside, pushing him right up against the fridge.

“What the *fuck*?”

“I could say the same to you!” Chu Wanning said. “Let *go*.”

“How could you- What if it had-”

“I told you,” Chu Wanning said, and pushed him back with his good hand. “My rules.”

Mo Ran let go. He was shaking. “Please don’t- You can’t *do* shit like that. Not now.”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do,” Chu Wanning said. But he reached out his hand and squeezed Mo Ran’s. “It’s fine. Well. It’s not, but it’s not poison…”

He held out the note for Mo Ran to take.

Chu Wanning,

I received your e-mail and the attached file. I know that this request will be a difficult one, but I urgently need to speak to you in person. I think I’m being watched – please forgive the unusual delivery and do not *reply to this message.*

I know you’ll have been invited to the Rufeng centenary. Please meet me there so that we can talk without raising suspicion.

I know the nature of the request I’m making, but if you have any lingering loyalty to my mother, I beg you to come to Linyi on the 3rd of November.

Nangong Si

Linyi. Lin-*fucking*-yi. Why was it always Linyi?

“Let’s say, in your delusional world, that you were actually telling the truth, and not a gold-digging, desperate slut. How would you prove it? A DNA test? You can’t afford a coat, and you think you can afford a DNA test? And if I refuse to take it, which I will, you’re going to be able to afford a lawyer to persuade a court to order me? You stupid bitch.”

While Mo Ran had been reading, Chu Wanning had picked up a balled-up paper from the floor next to the bin. He smoothed it out on the kitchen counter, and Mo Ran read the gilt characters of the invitation.

“They might as well have written ‘trap’ on the envelope.”

Chu Wanning nodded. “I have to go.”

Mo Ran blinked. “Fuck no.”

“*If you have any lingering loyalty to my mother*. I have to.”

“No, that just means he knows how to manipulate you! What if he’s confronted his dad, and his dad’s got to him? What if they’re working together?”

“Nangong Si wouldn’t. He loved his mother.”

“You’ve met him *once* since he was thirteen, and he behaved like a power-mad bullying asshole.”

Chu Wanning looked away, and the change of light highlighted the glitter of tears in his eyes. “I have to,” he quietly repeated again.

He had to. And he was afraid.

Which meant that Mo Ran had to go as well.

He’d have walked into hell for Chu Wanning, without a second’s hesitation. But Linyi was worse than hell.

Fuck.

“We’ll have to fly. I know you prefer the train, but tomorrow’s the 2nd.”

Chu Wanning looked back at him. His jaw was tight, which Mo Ran knew now was to stop his chin from trembling. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t. But I’m coming. It says ‘and guest’, right?”

Chu Wanning didn’t answer. But his face was so open, so tender, so scared and so grateful, that Mo Ran had no choice but to kiss it.

He put his arms around him and sighed. “You know how to tie a bow-tie?”

Chapter 49: The Worst City in the World

Chapter Summary

> Hello everyone! Ah, so, um, after many years of wondering and two years on the waiting list for an assessment, I was told this week that I'm going to be officially diagnosed with ASD. After about 90 seconds of vast and overwhelming relief, I suddenly felt intensely embarrassed. My reaction really surprised me! I've literally been writing this fic for months, in which the stigmatisation of autism is a major theme, but then, as Garfield says, I'm not immune to internalised stigma, am I? I think diagnosis is absolutely a good thing, and a really huge step, and the certainty will be a big help to me going forward. Anyway, I just wanted to thank you all for being so supportive and encouraging about it - thank you! 🥹♥
>
> Content warnings for this chapter: Discussion of cancer (cervical) and HPV (including stigmatising language concerning STDs); offensive, shaming, and misogynistic language.

Ran’er’s mother was ill.

She had tried to hide it from him, but now it was impossible. It was visible on her face, which had become round like the moon. She had a big stomach, and she had cried when Ran’er asked if she was going to give him a didi.

(He’d go hungry if it meant that his didi could have food. He’d protect him from anyone who was mean to him. He’d teach him all the clever tricks he’d learnt in his eight long years. He’d be the very best gege in the whole world. He longed for a didi to love and look after, and wished for one every night. But Mama said she couldn’t give him a didi now.)

Her legs were big too, like balloons, but Ran’er had learnt how to massage them in *just* the right way so that she could sleep at night. She called him her little doctor, which made him feel proud.

She didn’t like to eat anymore. Food made her throw up. And she was in pain, so much pain she cried from it. The first time Ran’er had stolen pills from the pharmacy she’d told him off and made him return them.

Then she didn't tell him off anymore.

Then she told him which ones to take.

They were sleeping in the back room of a restaurant where his mother washed dishes at night in exchange for the use of the corner, two meals a day, and a warm place where Ran'er could do his homework, when he actually made it to the school.

He'd decided to stop going. How could his mind hold all those lines and characters and sums when it was full of words like 'lymphatic' and 'metastasis'? The other children thought they were Pokémon.

Today, though, his mother wasn't at work. She had waited until he was sat at one of the restaurant tables, swinging his legs while he pretended to practice his characters, and then she slipped out of the door. Obviously, he'd followed her.

She walked a long, long way – longer than she ever went these days – to the other side of Linyi, where the buildings were like magic castles from a picture book.

She went to one of these buildings, where she spoke to a man who looked like a security guard, but he was wearing a suit and tie. This man went into the big doors, and his mother waited outside for a long, long time. Ran'er's fingers were cold; it was autumn now, and Linyi's clear skies made it a dry, chilly place.

Eventually, another man came out. He was handsome and wore a suit as well. But the way his face twisted at the sight of Ran'er's mother made him ugly, and the way he grabbed her swollen arm to pull her away to a secluded corner made him even uglier.

Ran'er crept after them.

“- not enough to call me at all hours of the day and night, but now you turn up here? Where I work, where I *live*?”

“If you’d answered me, I wouldn’t have had to. But I don’t have much time.”

“Neither do I. My wife is inside, and she’s ill.”

“So am I.”

“She has cancer.”

“Cervical?” his mother asked.

Ran’er could tell it shocked the man. “How the hell did you know that? Have you been *stalking* us?”

“No. But it’s what I have. HPV. It’s an STD. It can cause cervical cancer.”

His mother cried out; the man was wrenching her wrist.

“*You gave my wife HPV*?”

“How could I have?” His mother was close to tears, but her voice was strong. “We never slept together, you said! *You* gave your wife HPV. And me too. I was a virgin when you- You wrote my death sentence.”

“You lying whore. You come here, with hair down to your waist, and try to tell me-“

“I couldn’t afford chemotherapy! It’s too far gone – I, there’s no chance. I’m dying.”

“How can-? That doesn’t make any sense. You’re young – even if you don’t *look* it now – how could it have spread so fast?”

“That medical company, Guyueye – they put out an advert for pregnant women, they said that they’d give free pre-natal care if they were allowed to monitor us. But while I was there, I contracted BBS, and they said on the news that they deliberately gave it to women to see if it was passed down to the babies.”

“I’ve never heard anyone say that BBS causes cancer.”

“Not on its own. It mainly attacks the bones, but bones aren’t just *bones*, are they? Bone marrow is important for the immune system. And it turned out… You gave me HPV. It’s a virus. It can lie dormant for years, the doctor said. You gave me HPV, and my bone marrow is just… just *nothing* now, and it turned into cervical cancer.”

Ran’er watched his mother struggle with her breathing and her emotions. He could see her putting on her ‘street face’, calm and friendly and above all grateful for any money the passers-by gave her for her playing.

“But I’m not angry. I don’t have any energy to be angry.”

“You’re here to beg instead.”

“Yes.” Then his mother began to kneel on the freezing concrete, and the man pulled her up roughly.

“What are you doing?!”

“I’m *begging* you.”

“And you think that making a scene will help?!”

“I don’t care! I just need you to look after Ran’er! I need to know that you’ll protect our son when I’m gone!”

“I have a son. Your bastard isn’t him.”

“He’s yours. I can prove it. There’s been no one else. Please, he’s- *Ran’er’s* the kindest, sweetest, most affectionate boy – so clever, so loving, so loyal. Your, your other son – oh, he’s always wanted a brother-“

“A *brother*? If you even imagine- You are *delusional*. You are fucking insane.”

“You have a responsibility! He’s yours, and I- The DNA will prove it! You have to look after him!”

“Let’s say, in your delusional world, that you were actually telling the truth, and not a gold-digging, desperate slut. How would you prove it? A DNA test? You can’t afford a coat, and you think you can afford a DNA test? And if I refuse to take it, which I will, you’re going to be able to afford a lawyer to persuade a court to order me? You stupid bitch.”

His mother was crying now, desperate sobs that wracked her whole body. “Please. *Please*. Why are you being like this? You have so much, so, so much, and I have nothing. My little boy has nothing! You’ll let your son starve!”

The man looked at her as though she was a smear of shit on the pavement. “If you come here again, I will have you arrested for harassment. If you phone me again, I will have you arrested for harassment. If you try to contact my wife or my son, I will have you arrested for harassment. Then you will die in prison, and your son will know his mother was a criminal as well as a whore.”

The handsome, well-dressed man turned away, and the vast wooden doors groaned shut behind him.

Ran'er wanted to run out and hold his mother. He wanted to bang his fists on the huge, beautiful gate and *kill* that man. He wanted to rip his hair out and pull out his eyes and tear his mouth open.

But he was big now, nearly nine years old, and he knew shame and humiliation too. And if he went to comfort his mother now, he would be doing her the extra harm of having witnessed her begging, the disgusting names the man had thrown in her face.

His mother was already wiping her face. Ran'er ran back to the restaurant ahead of her, making sure he was back at the same table that she'd left him at when she left earlier. By the time she came back she was smiling, and so Ran'er smiled back at her as well, hugging her gently so he didn't hurt her tummy and running to make some hot tea for her and holding her cold fingers between his hands to warm them.

He showed her the handful of characters he'd hurriedly practiced. He was going to do well in school, he assured her, so that he could get a good job and earn loads and loads of money, and buy a beautiful house for them to live in, with a big bed and a toilet and a shower and a kitchen. She said that she knew he would.

That night, his mother told him that they were going to move to a new city in the south, a place of mountains and rivers with long, hot summers called Xiangtan. They were going to live with Mama's best friend in the whole world, his auntie Xun Fengrou, who lived in a house with kind, beautiful ladies who would just love Ran'er and dote on him and spoil him.

They were going to leave Linyi.

She never did.

*

Mo Ran was pulled from his painful reverie by the pilot announcing that they were about to make their final descent.

Linyi…

He had to come, he reminded himself for the fiftieth time.

If he went and everything was fine, then he'd get to have some free champagne and spend a weekend with Chu Wanning, see him all dressed up in black tie and being rude to snobby rich people. You couldn't ask for a better time than that. If he didn't go and everything was fine, then he'd have saved himself from some memories, but feel like a shit, and have a few days alone doing fuck-all except worrying.

But if he went, and everything wasn't fine, at least he could be there to support Chu Wanning. Even if he was arrested, Mo Ran would be there to phone lawyers and let people know where he was. Defend him, if there was some public confrontation. Witness it. Protect him, depending on exactly how bad 'not fine' was, and given the fucking nail-bomb, the spectrum of 'fine' to 'not fine' was a pretty substantial one.

And if he hadn't gone, and everything wasn't fine, he'd never have forgiven himself.

So, it had been a simple choice to make. But that hadn't made it an easy one.

Chu Wanning groaned and nuzzled his face deeper into his shoulder as the cabin crew went through raising people's blinds.

He'd travelled over four thousand kilometres in forty hours, a week after surgery, and facing a meeting he was utterly dreading. He'd managed to get through the journey to Chengdu with little more than a bad temper, but then they'd missed their flight: In the airport there was an argument as to whether to let Chu Wanning onto the plane when the ground crew recognised his name and someone raised an objection to his being allowed on board. He'd ended up in the airport's infirmary with his heart going a million beats a minute while Mo Ran argued with the desk staff, and then their managers, and then finally the Operations Senior Agent. He

shamelessly used Xue Zhengyong's name, cashing in on his former position of Mayor of Chengdu, and he managed to get both of them on the next direct flight to Linyi.

Chu Wanning slept the whole way; in order to calm his atrial fibrillation before he was allowed to board, he'd taken the maximum dose of beta blockers along with his painkillers from the clinic in Shanghai, and he barely moved for the entire flight, face nestled in Mo Ran's shoulder.

Mo Ran gave the flight crew smiles of amused tolerance whenever they passed, which they returned, as though he wouldn't willingly be Chu Wanning's personal pillow 24/7.

"We're here," Mo Ran said, nudging Chu Wanning awake.

He frowned in response. "Obviously. We are 'here' wherever we are…"

Mo Ran resisted the desire to kiss him. "Someone's grumpy."

"Don't talk to me like that."

"Someone needs a good meal and a long sleep."

Chu Wanning pinched his arm, but he looked more awake; he blinked blearily as the rest of the passengers started to stand up and fight over who could disembark first.

"I really don't get it," Mo Ran said. "Why are you scared of planes but not trains? Aren't there more train accidents than plane ones?"

"I'm not *scared,*" Chu Wanning said, as Mo Ran had known he would. "But I have a doctorate in aeronautical engineering."

“I thought it was aerospace engineering?”

“It’s the same thing. The engineering is aeronautical before it becomes aerospatial.”

“Aerospatial… What’s ‘trains’, then?”

“Locomotive.”

“You need to get a doctorate in locomotive engineering, then. Complete the set.”

“Then I’ll just know too much to be able to go on a train either,” Chu Wanning said, glaring at a couple of passengers fighting over aisle space.

“I mean, it’s safe, though, isn’t it? You should know that.”

“I *do* know that. I know that aeronautical physics are perfectly sound. The overwhelming majority of aeronautical disasters are the result of human error.”

“Ah…” Mo Ran said. “So you trust the planes. You just don’t trust the pilots.”

“I trust the *physics*. The planes were also made by people,” Chu Wanning rejoined.

His irritable mood lasted through the whole airport – understandable, really, given the mass of people, the bright lights and tannoys, and the hour spent being questioned in the security office while a guard pawed through his bag.

But they were finally free to go, and made their way to a four-star hotel on the University side of the river. Mo Ran had been the one to book the rooms – two, at Chu Wanning’s insistence, but with an adjoining door, at Mo Ran’s – just in case they decided not to let them

in. Chu Wanning lingered in the lobby while Mo Ran booked them in, wearing his hair up in his hat and his face mask.

The girl on the desk kept stealing glances at him, and Mo Ran realised they probably looked like gangsters, Mo Ran playing the part of bodyguard. He didn't mind that. "Sir prefers to be more low-key when he travels," he said secretively, and filled in Chu Wanning's form with the classic placeholder name of Zhang San. "Privacy is the greatest luxury. What's the point of a fancy suite if you can't hear yourself think for all the screaming girls, eh?"

"Oh, I understand!" said the young woman, and Mo Ran gave her a generous tip. "If there's anything sir needs…"

"We'll just get room service and go to sleep. The big event's tomorrow evening, so he'll want his suit pressed, if someone could collect it when they bring up the food." Chu Wanning would obviously never consider such a thing, but Mo Ran knew the power of looking sharp.

"And yourself, sir?"

Mo Ran's own suit didn't fit anymore; the Xues had bought it for him when he was an undergrad for some event or other, and it was tight across the shoulders. "I'm going to buy one. The last one got…" He smiled mysteriously. "Torn."

Chu Wanning came up behind him, and narrowed his eyes at the desk clerk, before glaring up at Mo Ran. "What are you doing?"

"Just booking us in, sir," Mo Ran said, suddenly the accommodating assistant.

"Well, stop taking up so much of the lady's time," he hissed, and Mo Ran realised with delight that he was *jealous*.

"Oh, it's no problem at all, sir," she said, staring intently at his face. "Anything we can do to make your stay more pleasant. Will you need a car tomorrow evening?"

“Just a taxi, nothing flashy,” Mo Ran said. “But if you have a staff entrance round the back…”

“Of course, of course – no problem at all.”

Chu Wanning looked at him suspiciously in the lift. “What was that about?”

“I was implying you were a celebrity hiding out from your adoring fans.”

“Mo Ran!”

“What? Baobei, you’re so hot we need to be taking advantage of it *way* more often. Now we’ll get top-notch service.”

“Now we’ll get *attention* that we *don’t want*.”

“*But* if I’m your assistant-slash-bodyguard, that explains why I specifically asked for the adjoining rooms.”

Chu Wanning thought this through. “I don’t like it.”

“Of course not. But look at how she believed it. I look like I’m looking after a film star or something…”

Chu Wanning punched him lightly on the hip.

As Mo Ran had said, they were both exhausted, capable only of picking through some lacklustre room service and then each taking a quick shower.

Chu Wanning was moving his arm stiffly, and had changed into his ivory silk pyjamas. He looked around their adjoining door.

“Sorry,” he said, gaze fixed on the floor. “I was… I’ve been irritable all day.”

Mo Ran smiled at him from the bed. “You were totally fine. Don’t worry about it for a second. Come on, I know something that’ll help you to relax.”

It both amused and pained him to see Chu Wanning’s expression of fear. “No, no, sorry! Though, next time we’re in a swanky hotel… No, you said how in Shanghai the massaging helped, and there’s a trainer at my gym who also does sports massage, so I booked a lesson with him to see how to do your back and your shoulder without fucking it up.”

For some reason, this made Chu Wanning look even more terrified.

Mo Ran felt his smile beginning to slide off his face. He sat up. “I mean, we don’t have to – I thought it might be nice, if it was stiff after all the travelling…”

This apparently made it worse. Chu Wanning was normally so stoic, so aloof – his face was like something carved from white jade, elegant and smooth and unmoving. But now it *twisted*. He suddenly made a strange noise, a long, low hum, and turned around sharply.

“Baobei…?” Mo Ran cursed himself and propelled himself up off the bed. He gingerly reached out his hand to place it on Chu Wanning’s shoulder.

It was shaking.

“Baobei, I’m sorry – I know normally you don’t like that much- but I thought that as I’d helped with the sheets you didn’t mind me… What’s wrong, what have I done?”

Chu Wanning shook his head violently and made the humming noise again. “Mmmmmm. Nmnhm.” It was a sound of negation: not something that Mo Ran had done, then?

Chu Wanning finally turned to face him. There were tears gathered in the corners of his eyes.

It cut Mo Ran to his heart, every tear one of those knives in his chest that Chu Wanning was so afraid of. He cupped Chu Wanning’s face in his hands. “Then what is it? Wanning, sweetheart…”

Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut. “Too much,” he hissed, and there was genuine pain in his voice. “Too much – too- too-”

Too much. Too fast. He’d known he was going to mess up, known he shouldn’t have made jokes when Chu Wanning was so tense. “I’m sorry, I fucked up-”

“*No!*” Chu Wanning headbutted him in the chin, clumsy and desperate, as he shoved himself forward. “No, no, not you, never you- Mo Ran*, Mo Ran*-” He curled in, hiding his face in the crook of Mo Ran’s neck.

Confused beyond words, Mo Ran rubbed Chu Wanning’s back instead.

“I’ve been a *bastard* all day, while you’ve done everything, organised everything, and then you offer- you had a *lesson*-”

Mo Ran sighed and tightened his grip around Chu Wanning, kissing his ear. Every time his heart healed, it was broken again. Chu Wanning, overwhelmed to the point of tears, because his boyfriend offered him a back massage. Offered to massage the back which had been scarred saving his life.

“I wanted to,” he said, trying to make his voice comfortingly, confidently low.

“No one’s ever been so- You were worried it was stiff- Don’t *deserve*-”

“Of course you deserve it. And I mean it. I wanted to. It makes me feel useful. Makes me feel good, to be able to look after you a little. Like you’ve looked after me.”

He felt Chu Wanning shake his head against his neck, and he chuckled. “Besides. You’ve been *way* more of a bastard in the past.” He kissed Chu Wanning’s ear again, to soothe any of the sting from his words. “To be honest, you’re kind of sexy when you’re being a bastard…”

Chu Wanning moaned his name against his shoulder, a sound which awoke his treacherous cock in an instant. He inhaled deeply, trying to calm it.

Chu Wanning’s hair was mussed but silky under his cheek, and smelling of flowers. He’d never in a million years have dreamt that Chu Wanning could be *clingy*, but it healed something in him. In the past, it had always been him who wanted more, but here, now… Chu Wanning made him feel twelve feet tall. The slightest kind gesture was enough to engender *this*, and it made Mo Ran want to spoil him until he was never surprised by such a thing again.

He squeezed Chu Wanning as tightly as he could while avoiding putting any pressure on his shoulder. “Shall we pretend we’re in Yuliang?” he suggested softly.

Chu Wanning paused for a second before he nodded, and Mo Ran was sure he felt a glancing kiss against his throat. He nearly regretted offering to share a bed, because how was he supposed to keep his hands to himself after *that*? But he’d become much more adept at mastering himself in the last few months, and so he guided Chu Wanning to the bed, then turned out the lights in both rooms.

“Tomorrow…” Chu Wanning began, when Mo Ran settled under the duvet. “I’m…”

Mo Ran moved closer, and raised his hand to stroke Chu Wanning's hair. "Hm?"

"I'm… I don't know what's going to happen."

He was nervous, Mo Ran realised. He was scared, but his face would never let him say it. He wrapped his arms around Chu Wanning as they hadn't been able to do in Yuliang and pressed his lips to his temple.

"We'll be okay. Whatever happens, whoever's there, whatever they say, we'll be together."

This time, he promised the darkness of Linyi, he was going to protect the person he loved.

Chapter 50: The Reunion

Chapter Notes

> So, people who've read all of 2ha will notice that I've made a change to the original - but hey, it's transformative fiction, right? I was thinking about how best to streamline some elements of this arc, and then... well...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> While the creation of Peking University was tied to the Imperial Court, and Tsinghua's links and history were with the United States and its Ivy League, Linyi was up the coast from British Shanghai, and its university had been founded with the idea of collegiate Confucianism – a kind of Oxbridge-sur-Yi, with the river as its own Isis or Cam, complete with multiple rowing crews. The Yunzi Library was modelled on the Old Bodleian, painstakingly recreated in Linyi sandstone, and instead of a single campus the University was spread across hundreds of quadrangles.
>
> But where Cambridge had 31 colleges and halls, and Oxford had 39, Rufeng was made up of a staggering 72. Of these, the oldest and richest College was Jiaoshan College, and the Master of Jiaoshan was technically considered *primus inter pares*. In reality the emphasis was firmly placed on the *primus*, and the Master of Jiaoshan was thus the President of the University entire. The position came with a palatial grace-and-favour 'house', on account of all the entertaining the President was meant to perform – a beautiful neo-Gothic building with leaded windows, surrounded by English-style gardens.
>
> Unlike the huge galas in massive auditoriums in Tsinghua or Peking, parties in Rufeng were usually conducted in these much smaller gatherings, suggesting exclusivity and intimacy. Guest lists of more than two hundred were rare. The Rufeng philosophy was that true power didn't need to shout. True power whispered with smiles and easy compliments. True power had more than enough face to share.
>
> Nangong Liu, with his manners and his charm, had been the very model of a Rufeng Jiaoshan President.
>
> This was what Chu Wanning relayed to Mo Ran between long, lazy bouts of kissing, as they lay together through the whole morning. It felt like the reprieve before a battle, but Mo Ran

thought that this might be the most beautiful Chu Wanning had ever been, all pink from the warmth of sleep, eyes sleepy and heavy-lidded, voice meandering as his gaze lingered on Mo Ran's lips and dimples and eyes with a reverential attention.

It was with palpable reluctance that they got up to eat an early but substantial lunch in the hotel's restaurant; Chu Wanning warned him that the food was likely to be fancy but not particularly filling. He offered to accompany Mo Ran on his expedition to buy a new suit, but Mo Ran assured him it was fine. Chu Wanning hated shopping at the best of times, especially clothes shopping, and Mo Ran thought that he'd prefer a few hours on his own to prepare himself for the ordeal they were approaching.

He also wanted to walk the streets of Linyi alone again. Just in case…

Just in case of what, he didn't know. He just knew that today the air was heavy in his lungs.

Four hours later, he returned to the hotel having found a suit and nothing else. Linyi had plenty of excellent menswear shops. Ever so many balls and dinners and concerts to go to, walking past a starving woman or her son on their way.

Only one hadn't.

He'd been wearing a woollen coat of pale blue, and he had stripped it off without a thought and wrapped it around Ran'er. It was warm with his warmth, and it made the dirty street smell like flowers were blooming all around him, despite the slush and the snow.

It was like being wrapped in the warm summer sky.

The boy, a few years older than him, a middle school pupil instead of a university student, had pulled off a white hat, as soft and fluffy as a cloud. He placed it on Ran'er's filthy hair and pulled it down over his ears. Snowflakes began to settle on the boy's close-cropped hair instead.

“Oh, your hands!” he said with soft distress, and pulled off his matching gloves, but these he didn’t give to Ran’er.

Instead, squatting right in front of him, the other boy had taken his numb hands in his own, squeezed them briefly, and then bowed his head and breathed on them.

Mo Ran adjusted the suit bag he was holding, feeling sick. No. He couldn’t think of that. Today he had to be alert, he had to be vigilant. The present and the future held plenty of danger; his attention couldn’t be on the past.

He’d tried to buy a fake bow tie, but the tailor in the shop had said, “We do not sell… *clip-ons*,” as though Mo Ran had asked for a strap-on instead.

“Just a pre-tied one, then.”

“*Those either*.”

The temptation to lamp the snobby bastard was almost overwhelming, but he couldn’t look after Chu Wanning from a cell. So he bought the silk bow tie the tailor brought out, resenting every yuan.

By that point he’d just wanted to get back to the hotel, but he was regretting not finding another shop now. The suit looked sharp as fuck, but even with video instructions, he just couldn’t make the bow tie work.

He gave up for the moment, but his melancholy had settled on him like that old blue coat. Chu Wanning had left the door between their rooms ajar, so Mo Ran quietly went to it, thinking that a bit of teasing and playful bullying would cheer him up.

Instead, what he saw took his breath away.

Chu Wanning was standing by the window, staring out over the city, about to put his jacket on. The white of his shirt was glaring, his bow tie already absolutely immaculate – and visibly self-tied, as his shirt had a different collar to Mo Ran's. It stood up stiffly, only covering the tie with two little triangles at the front, these tucked in turn behind the black butterfly of the bow. The tailor had tried to explain the difference between a wing-tipped collar and a turn-down, and visibly suffered when Mo Ran said he didn't care and would take the less formal option.

He was the most beautiful person that Mo Ran had ever seen. Unaware that he was being watched, his face was relaxed in pensive solemnity. His face was like white jade, carved in austere perfection, his cheek-bones high, his nose straight. But there was no coldness; alone as he was, Chu Wanning's long-lashed eyes were thoughtful, not hard or guarded.

Unable to believe his luck, Mo Ran silently raised his phone.

The click of the camera alerted Chu Wanning to his presence. "What the- Delete that!"

"Never," Mo Ran said. "This photo could win awards."

Chu Wanning turned to him in his anger, and Mo Ran suddenly realised that he'd been too transfixed by the beauty of his face to notice his *body*. Who *was* he?

"*Holy shit*. What is *that*?"

Chu Wanning was wearing a sash of black silk, wrapped tightly around his tiny waist. Mo Ran felt an old, familiar surge of rage, that Chu Wanning was going to go out in *public*, flaunting the curve of his back and his arse, the ludicrous size of his waist, to the entire world. Like a slut!

"It's a cummerbund," Chu Wanning said, using the English.

Calm down. Calm the fuck down! "A- a what?"

Chu Wanning glared at him in embarrassment. “I couldn’t afford bespoke, and the smallest the tailor did was a 26-inch waist. So he took it in, but he said I should wear it with a cummerbund to disguise the alteration at the sides and smooth the shirt.”

Mo Ran blinked at the offending article, assimilating this new information entirely against his will. “It looks… Fuck. You look fucking incredible.”

“You don’t need to lie – I know it looks old-fashioned-”

“No, seriously! *You* look… Fucking hell.” Mo Ran stepped forward and put his hands on Chu Wanning’s hips. “I’m dead serious. Fuck Nangong Si. E-mail him tomorrow or something. You look so good in this I want to see you out of it.”

“What kind of line is that?” Chu Wanning said, but Mo Ran could feel him melting towards him.

“Can’t think of anything wittier. All the blood flowed from my brain to somewhere else…”

“Shameless!” Chu Wanning said, but he was smiling now, and his ears were turning pink. “You are completely incorrigible.”

“I’m just telling the truth. Shizun likes honesty…”

“Well,” Chu Wanning said. “You… you look… good.”

Mo Ran beamed. “Yeah?”

“Mn.”

“How good?”

Chu Wanning ducked his face to hide the fact that his blush had spread to his cheeks. “Very good… Great.”

Mo Ran took pity on him and kissed his ear. “Not as great as my baobei. I’m going to have to keep a close eye on you tonight. All the women are going to be throwing themselves at you.”

“Not with you there,” Chu Wanning said. His fingers ghosted over Mo Ran’s chest, and he noticed that Chu Wanning’s cuffs weren’t buttoned – they were pinned together with small, translucent violet-scarlet stones in the shape of plum blossoms, miniscule golden solder beads forming the anthers.

“Carnellian?”

“Rubellite,” Chu Wanning said, but one of his hands drifted up to where, Mo Ran realised with a jolt, he was wearing his necklace under his shirt.

“They look good. You look *so* good.”

Chu Wanning was finally running the ends of Mo Ran’s bow tie between his fingers. “I like black tie,” he confessed softly. “I like dress codes. Things like the cummerbund. Traditionally the ‘workings’ of the suit should be hidden, and the cummerbund hides the button of the trousers. When I first went to England, I read books on Western etiquette, and dress codes… It meant that here was *one* element of a social occasion that I couldn’t ruin. If I just obeyed the dress code perfectly, then that was one less thing I had to worry about. And there were such detailed guides: shirts should have a Marcella front, wing-tip collar, double cuffs. Dinner jacket should be black barathea wool with satin lapels… All those stupid, snobby rules. But if you meet them all perfectly, then… Then no one can say anything.”

It was all just another shield, Mo Ran thought. The immaculate dress, like the cold expression: just an oyster shell hiding the soft vulnerability within. Chu Wanning wore his

dinner jacket like it was a suit of armour, the cummerbund protecting his abdomen, the ultra-formal cuffs and the exquisitely tasteful links like gauntlets.

"I'm not like you," Chu Wanning continued softly. "I don't have the looks or charisma to be informal. When you walk into a room it feels like the barometric pressure changes."

They were so close that Mo Ran could smell the scent of Chu Wanning's shampoo. His hair retained a little dampness from the shower, and the shining black mass was swept back into a neat topknot on the crown of his head. He'd combed back the softening locks that hid his temples, wearing his new scar brazenly, but as they dried a few wisps of hair were beginning to escape.

"There," Chu Wanning said, and patted the bow tie in satisfaction.

Mo Ran captured his fingers and kissed them.

"We need to go. It starts at seven."

"Need to spend another minute with the most beautiful man in the world before I have to share him." The kiss he demanded from Chu Wanning tasted like toothpaste, and his hands moved down from Chu Wanning's waist to his- "Wait, do you have sweets in your pockets?"

"And my tablets," Chu Wanning said, as though this helped. "I told you. The food can be very… It's just nice to have something."

This stupid man, who would disguise a suit alteration and then ruin its line with White Rabbits and his Leatherman and his mechanical pencil. This beautiful, adorable man… Mo Ran kissed him again and wished that they could just never leave – that the world outside would cease to exist, and they could kiss in this hotel room forever.

But, of course, they couldn't – not when Chu Wanning was so dutiful. The hotel wasn't far from Jiaoshan College, and Chu Wanning showed the invitation (retrieved from beside the

bin, flattened and ironed) to the porters.

Mo Ran looked up as he did so, white-faced. He knew this huge, oak door, with its black nails and its wicket gate.

They were both quiet as they walked across a vast courtyard. Chu Wanning called it a ‘quadrangle’. “The President’s Lodgings are through here,” he said, turning down an archway to another courtyard.

“I can’t believe you studied here,” Mo Ran said, and was shocked at himself; a ghost of the old rage, the old anger. It died almost instantly, as soon as he looked down at the man next to him and remembered.

“I wanted to stay in England,” Chu Wanning said softly. “Oxford’s the major Anglophone University without any age limitations, it had the experience with prodigies – Ruth Lawrence in the 1980s, Sufiah Yusof in the 1990s. Me in the 2000s… You specialise right from the beginning. Tuition was one-to-one. They were flexible. That’s why I finished in three years instead of four. And they… They don’t call it ‘loneliness disorder’ or ‘self-enclosure disorder’ there. They had ‘support resources’, instead of… But Huaizui hated it. Too much independence for me, too much dependence for him. He couldn’t speak English, and the tutors over there wouldn’t let him in the tutorials or the lectures or the libraries. It was the first time since I’d been adopted that I could do exactly what I wanted. Read what I wanted, talk to whomever I wanted… But Physics at Oxford, you finish with a Master’s, so we planned to come straight back as soon as I graduated and started looking into doctorates in China. Only in China.”

What would Chu Wanning’s life had been like, Mo Ran wondered, if he’d stayed in the UK or gone to America? No trauma with Rong Yan and Nangong Liu. No court case. No trials. No RSDL, no arrests…

But no Mo Ran. So, selfishly, he was glad that Huaizui had been such a controlling bastard.

The President’s Lodgings were just as grand as Chu Wanning had said. There was a small cloakroom which led to the large main room, hung with crystal chandeliers and gold-framed paintings. The windows were set in stone, punctuated with stained glass coats of arms. Set into one wall was a huge stone fireplace, big enough for six men to stand in. Across the

mantlepiece, very incongruously, were Chinese characters carved and gilded: the six virtues of wisdom, faith, piety, righteousness, benevolence, and loyalty.

On the opposite wall, a wood-banistered staircase led up to a mezzanine level. There was a *lot* of wood, actually – wooden ceiling, wooden floor, wooden wainscotting. It felt dark and oppressive, even with all the lamps.

Against it, Chu Wanning was luminous.

There were about seventy guests in the space, early as they were, with a rainbow of dresses and sparkling jewellery amid the dinner suits. Waiters in shirtsleeves, wearing blue satin waistcoats and face-masks to match, went between the guests carrying silver trays loaded precariously with flutes of champagne.

"Thank you," Chu Wanning said as he took two glasses, and received an odd look from the waiter. He handed a flute to Mo Ran, and led him to a more secluded corner.

"Just to illustrate what kind of pit of vipers we find ourselves in… The old man there, by the flower arrangement," Chu Wanning murmured. "That's Wan Jinhai. He was the CEO of Guyueye in the 1990s, when the Butterfly Bone experiments were happening. The man he's speaking to, Mu Huohan, was the judge he settled under. Large fine, minimal compensation for the victims, and no jail time." Chu Wanning gave him a crooked smile. "He also ruled against me at the High People's Court, before we took the appeal to the Supreme People's Court, but that's personal, rather than important."

"Want to make things awkward for them?"

"No," Chu Wanning said. "They'd not feel awkward. They don't have a single thread of conscience or shame between them. No, let's just find Nangong Si and get the hell out of here."

"Do you think he's found evidence?"

“I don’t know what there is to find. His mother’s copy of the divorce papers, perhaps… Or anything about Li and Chen. The policemen. Or maybe he’s found out something about his uncle.”

“I hate this fucking place,” Mo Ran said, looking around, but… it wasn’t entirely true. Part of him *hungered* for this dark opulence. He wanted to wear good clothes and drink good imported wine and nibble fancy delicacies. He wanted to be the street dog who these rich arseholes had to be polite to.

“Me too,” Chu Wanning said. “It just reminds me of… There’s the CCP Secretary of Linyi. And I think that’s Shanghai’s… Nangong Liu will be here. We need to be out before dinner. If I have to listen to him make a speech I *will* be arrested by the end of the night.” His eyes flickered towards the door, and he swore uncharacteristically. “*Shit*. Speak of Cao Cao, and Cao Cao appears…”

Mo Ran followed his gaze to the door, and the world stopped spinning.

He was wearing a different suit, of course, and age and fine living had softened his face. But seeing him here, in the flesh – seeing his expression, the way he moved, his voice when he greeted a friend – allowed Mo Ran to suddenly realise what merely looking at a posed portrait had not.

He knew this man.

For more than fifteen years, he had *hated* this man.

The champagne came back as acid, and Mo Ran left without a word, desperate to make it to the toilet. He needed to get out of this *fucking room*, but a backwards glance showed Chu Wanning’s stunned, betrayed face (his mother’s stunned, betrayed face; massaging legs, massaging backs) and the acid threatened to spew all over a woman’s backless gold dress.

Let’s say, in your delusional world, that you were actually telling the truth, and not a gold-digging, desperate slut.

He swallowed it, sweat beading in his hair, and threw open the door to the bathroom.

This isn't about helping A-Si. This is just about you feeding your own obsessions and your own delusions.

The watery vomit splattered in the porcelain sink, spotting on the gold taps. Next to him, a man gave him a look of disgust.

You are fucking insane.

"Steady on! It's only half seven, for heaven's sake…"

-on account of your youth, your mental illness-

At sixteen, he'd thought when he was listening to Chu Wanning's tape, Mo Ran wouldn't have approached Nangong Liu with a Dictaphone. He'd have used a knife.

If you come here again, I will have you arrested for harassment. If you phone me again, I will have you arrested for harassment. If you try to contact my wife or my son, I will have you arrested for harassment.

He ran the tap and washed out his mouth, swallowing down more bile with the water, before his brain caught up with his shaking hands.

We're not going to have this conversation again. Or I'll call the police, and I will have you arrested for harassment.

His father had tried to kill Chu Wanning.

Chapter End Notes

So, in the original, Mo Ran's real father is Nangong Yan, a cousin of Nangong Liu. This gives him Nangong blood which is needed for Plot Reasons, but otherwise it pretty much follows this; he already has a wife and son, and refuses to acknowledge Mo Ran as his, shortly after which his mother dies during a famine in Linyi.

I was basically thinking, "Hmm, I could get rid of this random extra Nangong who is clearly just Diet Nangong Liu", but then I realised that this change would make Nanging Si, King of Twats, Mo Ran's gege... I couldn't resist.

Chapter 51: Hongmen Banquet

Chapter Notes

Mo Ran left.

Without a word, without warning. He half-stalked, half-ran away from Chu Wanning, shoving past guests with a total lack of care or courtesy.

Chu Wanning stared for a second. What had he said? What had he *done*?

It didn't matter. Chu Wanning would ask, he'd apologise, but they couldn't separate. Not here, behind enemy lines.

He lost sight of Mo Ran amidst all the men wearing identical suits; he tried to follow in the direction he'd run, when someone gripped his elbow and yanked him bodily into a recess.

"What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

It was Mo Ran, just for an instant. And then it wasn't, as Chu Wanning looked up – yes, the same height, the same broad shoulders and narrow waist, the same thick brows and dimples. But lighter eyes, neater hair. Colder.

Nangong Si.

Chu Wanning blinked, thrown by the sudden strange confusion. "What? What do you mean, what am I doing here?"

“Why the *fuck* are you *here*? You’ve- You always hated things like this!”

“I still do.” Chu Wanning felt the familiar chill of dread in his spinal fluid. Nangong Si’s expression was one of shocked fury; Chu Wanning hadn’t seen his face since he’d interrogated him at the hospital, when he’d received the same look of rage, the same tone of stunned disbelief.

That just made me realise that I needed to come to this shithole as soon as I could, before someone finally managed to kill you.

What had he done? Mo Ran had *said* it was a trap, and now he’d dragged him right into it with him.

Where was he?

Chu Wanning shook Nangong Si’s hand off. “You *asked* me to come here.”

“I fucking didn’t.”

Bullshit. You fucking liar. *You’d better have some fucking proof. You fucking* machine-

Chu Wanning pulled the letter out of his pocket and pressed it to Nangong Si’s chest. “I’m here for *you*. Only for you.”

He had come all this way, exhausted, aching, risking seeing a man who had tried to kill him, to a place he’d sworn never to go again. For someone he hadn’t seen in years, who had bullied him into a confession the last time they’d met and never apologised. And now Nangong Si was angry with *him*?

He had let Mo Ran accompany him into the beast's lair, all for someone who thought he was a selfish liar and a heartless machine.

Chu Wanning gathered himself together and lifted his chin; Nangong Si might be bigger, taller, richer, younger, more handsome than him, but Chu Wanning could still freeze a man dead at fifty paces. He dropped his hand and clenched it by his side so that Nangong Si wouldn't see it shaking as he read the letter.

Then he stopped and thought: Wait. Why did he need to read-

"I didn't write this," Nangong Si said in quiet horror. "I didn't- I picked tonight because I knew you wouldn't- that you'd *never*-"

"Never what? Nangong Si," Chu Wanning said, injecting authority into his voice. "What did you pick tonight for?"

"They're going to announce my father as the next Mayor of Shanghai tonight. That's why there's so many Party officials here, not just Rufeng alumni. They were going to announce it, I was going to make a speech, and then instead I was going to tell them all about- Show them the evidence I've found- I e-mailed all of this to you!"

"I never received it. Only this." The draft gear struck; the carriages coupled. "The note you were sent, the one that made you come to Sichuan. Did you take a photo of it?"

Nangong Si fumbled with his phone. Chu Wanning turned them away so that no one else could see as they compared it to the letter.

Chu Wanning. The same characters in both.

The handwriting was identical.

“I need to get you out of here,” Nangong Si said.

“No. Mo Ran’s here. I need to find him.”

“Mo Ran? Your student? Why would you bring him?”

Chu Wanning didn’t bother to correct him. “Because I knew it could be a trap. Because you’re a police officer. The last time we met, you- I don’t know what would have happened if he hadn’t been there. I don’t know you. I haven’t known you since you were thirteen. I didn’t know if you believed me. If you believed your father instead.”

Hurt spasmed across Nangong Si’s face. “You think I’d side with the man who killed my mother?”

“I had no proof. You were angry, when you left Sichuan. I didn’t know if you believed me, or if you’d confronted your father, or if he’d managed to persuade you. I thought that maybe it was a trap, that you were working together, to finish what he started.”

“If you thought that then why the hell would you come?”

How could Chu Wanning explain? That it wasn’t just for Rong Yan, for the love he’d felt for her and his guilt at her murder.

That it was for A-Si himself, who at twelve had never had a care in the world, spoilt and doted on by his wealthy and successful parents, the only child of his generation. He could have been a little Emperor.

Instead, while his beloved parents were separating, this boy had welcomed Chu Wanning, a doctoral student just three years older than him, into his home. He had taught him how to play a Wii and a Playstation. A-Si had only laughed when Chu Wanning beat him every time they played along with *1 v. 100.* They went to Beijing to watch the Fencing in the Olympics, just days before… They’d watched *Paladins in Troubled Times* and *The Legend of Condor*

Heroes and *The Shaolin Warriors* together, practising moves and always greeting each other with kung fu salutes.

That was how.

Chu Wanning made a fist with his right hand, placed his left hand flat across its knuckles, and held it between them. “Because shidi could be in danger.”

Nangong Si’s mouth twisted. His eyes widened.

And then they hardened.

“You get out. I’ll find Mo Ran. My uncle must be in my e-mails, to know about the file, to stop the ones I sent to you. He knows what I’m planning tonight.”

“Maybe he wanted me to see it.”

“Or he wanted to kill us all while we’re all in the same place?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “What would his motive for that be?”

“What’s his motive for any of this? He’s unhinged. I heard your tape.”

“He is, but he’s put thought and planning into this…”

“We just need to get you out. Carefully, quietly, so if he’s watching us he doesn’t know we’re onto him.”

“No,” said Chu Wanning.

“I’ll find Mo Ran-”

“Not just him. We need to get everyone out.”

“You’re worried about another bomb?”

“Wouldn’t you be?” Chu Wanning countered. “If he *is* going to try something, we can’t let any innocent people be hurt.”

Nangong Si scoffed. “You haven’t seen the guest list. Everyone here is a corrupt, political piece of shit.”

Chu Wanning looked up at him, furious. “Really? And the chefs? The waiters? The- the young ladies the men have brought with them? I thought the job of the police was to protect civilians, A-Si.”

Nangong Si looked suitably chastened, and let the last sentence slide. “A bomb was my father’s MO. My uncle’s just… sent notes. If it was even him.”

Chu Wanning frowned in thought. “Why would he… Would you recognise him, if you saw him?”

“No. I always thought he died before I was born.”

“So it’s only me and your father.” A waiter approached them with a laden tray, and Chu Wanning fell silent. “No, thank you, we’re fine for the moment.”

“Of course, sir. Please let me know if you’d like a top-up,” the waiter said before he moved away.

Chu Wanning watched him go. His eyes lingered on the waiter’s face-mask.

No. He was being paranoid. He'd only seen Nangong Xu once. Would he really be able to recognise him?

“I have to find Mo Ran,” he said, but as he and Nangong Si turned to leave their corner, Chu Wanning made direct eye contact with Nangong Liu.

He felt dizzy, and it was only as he automatically assessed himself as his cardiologist had taught him that he realised his heart was fluttering. A perfect symbol of his cowardice, like a moth trapped in his chest, desperately beating its wings in the hope of escape.

However, Nangong Liu looked as bad as Chu Wanning felt. The smile that had been gracing it froze into a rictus.

Then it deepened.

“Chu Wanning!” Nangong Liu called across the room as he began to make his way towards them with all the appearance of joy and excitement of seeing him – the reunion of long-parted friends. His voice was pitched to carry, and every face turned towards Chu Wanning. “What a surprise – what a marvellous surprise! And you’re looking so well; oh, when I heard about what happened I was shocked, shocked beyond words, what an atrocity!”

The ring of eyes around them turned the room into an arena. Physically, mentally, morally, Chu Wanning had the upper hand, but socially he was a sitting duck. The knowledge of that was paralysing.

He remembered sitting at the bottom of the stairs, Rong Yan’s blood and cerebrospinal fluid smeared across her face, her open eyes shocked and blank. The emergency operator’s voice,

tinny and far away. Nangong Liu at the top of the stairs, staring down at him. Chu Wanning, staring up, holding out the mobile phone, the call being recorded. Nangong Liu nodding in understanding.

He remembered the weight of Mo Ran on his back, the blinding red pain of it, the deeper terror that Mo Ran was dead. The smoke in his lungs, stinging in his eyes. The glass under his hands, under his knees and shins. Every agonising inch. The second explosion; Mo Ran rolled off his back, and in the smoke and the fire Chu Wanning couldn't find him, his hands were too injured, he couldn't feel his clothes. Couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't smell, couldn't feel. He was encased in pure hell, and the only thing that kept him conscious was the pain. The pain, and the knowledge that Mo Ran would die as well as him.

But on the other hand… If he could survive that… he could survive eye contact with Nangong Liu.

Chu Wanning raised his shield: his coldest, most arrogant, most disdainful sneer. "We have nothing to say to one another."

Nangong Liu slithered forwards as though he hadn't even spoken. Chu Wanning glanced at Nangong Si, who shook his head minutely.

The desire to defy Nangong Si's wishes was almost overwhelming; Chu Wanning longed to throw all of his accusations in Nangong Liu's face. But Nangong Si was the one who held the evidence, so he was the one who decided when the trap was sprung.

Intellectually he knew that. But right now, Chu Wanning felt like nothing so much as bait.

"Nonsense, nonsense, it's been so long! Ah, I saw you on the television, but you've become even more handsome in real life; I never would have guessed it, knowing you as a boy. You know, I was literally just saying to President Li, someone of your intelligence shouldn't be in the back and beyond in Sichuan – it's like one of those old political exiles! The Supreme People's Court found in your favour and that should be the end of it. Come and talk to me and President Li tomorrow, I'm sure Rufeng could find a position in Physics for you."

Chu Wanning stood up as straight as he could. Nangong Liu was not a short man, but neither was he. The room was utterly silent now, all attention focused on them, even from the waiters with their trays of glasses or their bottles.

"Nangong Liu. I would rather be blown up again," he said. "And I'd rather the second one blows me straight to hell. How can you have such gall? You've not been President of Rufeng for more than a decade, but you presume to speak for Li Wuxin? Is he your puppet? You insult us both."

The hapless President Li Wuxin, the supposed host of the party, wrung his hands. "Not at all, not at all – we really were talking about it…"

Chu Wanning gave him a look of deep contempt, then returned his gaze to Nangong Liu. "It would shame me to receive anything from you. It would be an offence against my integrity. Merely talking to you is disgusting to me."

Nangong Liu's smile never faltered; instead, it deepened, softened. "Ah, Wanning. You're still holding onto such a childish grudge… But that is one of your symptoms, isn't it? Of your mental disorder. Cognitive rigidity… It's all right. I forgive you."

Chu Wanning's jaw clenched, and his fists with it. He couldn't lose his words. Not here. Not now. The silence was drowning in whispers, and every response Chu Wanning could think of would only strengthen Nangong Liu's case.

Nangong Liu looked pityingly at him. "If you're going to have an *episode*, perhaps you should step out, hmm? These ladies and gentlemen don't need to witness such a thing."

The waiter standing beside them – an older man, behind his face-mask – inhaled sharply.

Then Mo Ran's voice sliced through the gathering, loud and clear and strong.

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you – off with your friend in a corner, I should have guessed.”

Mo Ran barrelled through, smile wide enough to show his dimples. He carried two glasses of champagne, and handed one of them to Chu Wanning. “Ah, Nangong Si, I’m sorry, I’d have fetched one for yourself as well. And this must be your father! Wow, it’s not every day you meet a billionaire.”

Nangong Liu had frowned in confusion, but gathered himself together amiably. “Oh, no, no, not at all, not at all! Very nice to meet you, young man – are you Professor Chu’s guest?”

“I am, I am,” Mo Ran said, matching Nangong Liu’s cordial tone with surgical precision. “But I’m surprised you don’t recognise me.”

Then Mo Ran leant forward, and whispered something in Nangong Liu’s ear.

The blood drained from his face.

Mo Ran leant back and showed his teeth. “So maybe *you* should be the one to leave.”

Suddenly, the waiter standing close by sighed.

“No, no,” he said. “No one’s leaving. Not when I went to so much effort to gather you all here.”

He tipped his tray, and the flutes tumbled from it in a waterfall of champagne and glass, smashing into shards on the wooden floor.

Chu Wanning’s body finally caught up with his mind. “*Go*,” he said to Mo Ran and Nangong Si, and leapt forward, right hand like a knife, aiming for the waiter’s throat.

He batted Chu Wanning's hand away with the tray; Chu Wanning barely noticed the pain. There was shouting all around them. He lunged again, ignoring the aching stretch in his left shoulder as he aimed a blow at the waiter's head; again, he used the tray as a shield.

Then someone pinned his arms from behind and hauled him back – Mo Ran, he knew without looking.

"No! He's Nangong Xu!"

The waiter laughed. Above his mask, his eyes were curved into crescents.

"What a pleasant surprise. It's so rare that I'm not *completely* disappointed in *everyone*," he said, pulling his mask off. "I'd really wanted to wait until half past eight. It did say that's when the speeches would start, but what can you do? A good host has to roll with the punches."

He winked at Chu Wanning, and Chu Wanning struggled to free himself from Mo Ran's grasp.

"No offence – I know you're half my age, but you're crippled too, so it balances out. Great show, by the way. 'It would be an offence against my integrity' – God, you're even more annoying than my brother. Ah, no, no!"

Some of the guests had decided that all the drama was too much for them. They'd swarmed for the door, which was being blocked by two more waiters.

Nangong Xu slammed his tray again an antique table made of huanghuali wood. "Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and-"

A fight was breaking out at the door.

“It’s all right, Four,” Nangong Xu called to the other waiters. “They’re all extraneous. Feel free to make an example.”

One of them nodded, pulled a gun out from the back of his trousers, and then shot the closest man in the head.

Chu Wanning sagged in Mo Ran’s arms. He’d never seen someone be shot before. It happened slowly – the deafening sound of the gun, and then the bright spray of crimson across the wainscotting behind.

Mo Ran turned him around and hid his face in his shoulder.

Behind them there was another gunshot, much closer; Chu Wanning jumped again, then he felt Mo Ran's warm hands cover his ears. The volume was unbearable.

“As I was *trying* to say,” Nangong Xu said. Chu Wanning turned his head; he had climbed a couple of the steps of the staircase so that he could be seen by everyone. “Thank you for coming this evening and volunteering to be my witnesses. I want to set out clearly right from the beginning that I have absolutely no feelings about whether any of you live or die. This means that, as you can see, I have no qualms about killing you if you misbehave, but if you *do* behave, it means that you can all leave, perfectly unharmed, and on time. What was it the invitation said? ‘Carriages at midnight’.”

Nangong Xu looked down at them with a ghastly smile. “Unfortunately, the exceptions to this rule are as follows: Wan Jinhai. Mu Huohan. Nangong Liu. Nangong Si. Chu Wanning.”

Chapter 52: Ruat Caelum

Chapter Notes

> From here on in, we're really going to start earning that rating!
>
> Warnings for this chapter include: violence, murder, torture, rape (recounted, off-screen, no main characters involved, but graphic).

Mo Ran's ears were ringing. This simply could not be happening.

The guests shrunk to the walls, moving away as much as they could from the unfortunate men, as though the annunciation of their names had infected them with some virulent and deadly disease. They kept their eyes cast down at the floor as the waiters around them, to a man, set down the trays and the bottles of champagne.

Wan Jinhai wailed as one of the masked waiters came up to him, looped zip ties at the ready. "Me? Why me?! What did I do?! You can't do this! I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Who the hell do you think you are? Who the *fuck* are you? Don't you put a hand on me," Mu Huohan snarled to the next waiter. "Do you have any idea who I am? I swear I'll get the death penalty for every last one of you! Don't touch me!"

Nangong Liu couldn't tear his eyes away from his younger brother. "Whatever he's paying you," he tried to stammer at the man who was tying his hands behind his back, "I can double it. Triple it! You can go to Laos, to Thailand, anywhere you want- di, talk to me! What do you want?!"

Nangong Si was standing between Mo Ran, Chu Wanning, and his uncle – *their uncle* – arms out, ready to shield them.

The waiters approaching them looked bored. One of them shrugged and pointed his gun at the head of a young woman – the one in the backless golden gown – who shrieked in terror.

"Don't," Chu Wanning said, very gently. His lightning rage had passed, and now he was like snow. Always white, Mo Ran thought hysterically. "Leave her alone, there's no need to scare her. We're coming. We're all calm. What'll that do against a gun, A-Si? It's fine. We'll be fine."

Every single muscle in Mo Ran's body was tense. All he could think of was leaping forward and choking the life out of the smiling madman who had just said Chu Wanning's name.

But this wasn't a fantasy book. Mo Ran couldn't radiate his qi and melt bullets, like he'd once joked. Doing anything to even try to protect or defend the man he loved would result in a very simple and very unavoidable gunshot to the head.

So he was frozen, blood poisoned with cortisol and adrenaline, the taste of antifreeze in his mouth.

"It's all right," Chu Wanning was murmuring, as though from miles away. He placed his palm flat on Mo Ran's chest. "Keep your head down. Stay *calm*. Pick your moment. Get out if you can, bring people out with you if you can."

All the rage in him focused on Chu Wanning, just for a moment. Mo Ran wanted to scream. How could *he* be so calm? How could he be so fucking robotic?!

Chu Wanning smiled at him, a smile like stars and falling blossoms, and touched the carnelian necklace under Mo Ran's shirt. "We'll be fine. You'll be fine." It pressed against his sternum in a millisecond of exquisite pain, and then Chu Wanning was gone, walking calmly across the room with his head held high.

He looked up at Nangong Xu, and was shocked to see Nangong Xu staring right back at him. His head was cocked to one side, eyes slightly narrowed in thought.

Mo Ran was vibrating with fury, and he actually took a step forward when one of Nangong Xu's men forced Chu Wanning's injured arm behind his back and pulled the zip-ties cruelly tight.

Nangong Si looked as angry as he felt, and was visibly having a difficult time allowing someone to touch him.

"VIPs over here, please," Nangong Xu said, gesturing to the area under the mezzanine. "Put my dear nephew and the young professor to the side."

On the mezzanine, one of the masked men was holding some kind of large semi-automatic gun, looking out over the crowd of guests. The two men by the door had them too, and the one guarding the staff exit.

The guns that Mo Ran had occasionally smuggled around had only ever been small handguns, and even they were rare. For these men to have just one weapon like that, they had to be serious criminals.

Nangong Xu nodded towards him, still looking at him with that analytical expression. It apparently marked him out as a potential troublemaker, as one of the 'waiters' went and stood beside him.

"Now," he said, addressing the room. "These three *gentlemen* all have many things in common. They are extremely wealthy. Well-educated. Successful in their careers. And all of them have blood on their hands, and have escaped justice."

"I didn't! I've never hurt anyone!"

"Escaped justice, that is, until now," Nangong Xu said, as though Wan Jinhai hadn't spoken. Then he looked at him. "But if you insist, why don't we deal with you first?"

He smiled across the crowd. “Now, we have an excellent signal jammer in place, which is why those of you subtly trying to call the police aren’t having any luck. But you are here to be witnesses, so if you would like to film the proceedings, you are more than welcome to do so. All of the evidence for the accusations I’m about the level has been posted online this evening, so I assume there’s going to be plenty of interest if and when you do decide to upload anything. So we’ll start with Wan Jinhai, the only person to ever stand in a dock, but also the person who has destroyed the most lives.”

“I didn’t do anything! I paid the fine, I paid it – Judge Mu, tell them!”

“Wan Jinhai, you are charged with the offence that, in the period in which you were the CEO of Guyueye Pharmaceutics, you did knowingly and willingly approve the deliberate exposure of pregnant women to germline mutagens known to cause the severe hypophosphatasic-osteoporotic disease commonly known as ‘Butterfly Bone Syndrome’.”

“I didn’t!”

“But you settled in 2009 and 2011, didn’t you?” Nangong Xu said, with exaggerated innocence.

“That was- I paid the fines! I made it right-!”

“Made it right?” Nangong Xu laughed at him. “You paid off the government! The people whose lives you ruined didn’t see one yuan! So, my friend in Guyueye and I have decided that if you’re not going to give that compensation, then we’ll just have to go into the computers and take it. Say, ten million yuan. Which is not as much as they deserve, but it’s a good start.”

“Yes – yes!” Wan Jinhai said. “Ten million yuan, absolutely!”

“Each.”

Wan Jinhai blinked. “E-each?”

“Yes. Ten million yuan each. For every woman and every child.”

“But- but that would cripple the company!”

“It might break a few of its bones, but that’s just and fair, isn’t it? Let’s see – now, how many mothers were acknowledged in your settlements?”

“I- I don’t know; the lawyers did all of that!”

“Anyone?” Nangong Xu looked at Chu Wanning. “I bet *you* know. I remember your loud little stunt in Hong Kong. Or was it too long ago?”

“592 named women in the 2009 settlement,” Chu Wanning said carefully. “784 in the 2011. 27 cases unacknowledged by the judge, as they couldn’t be conclusively proven to have taken part.”

Nangong Xu grinned at him. “And how many children, do you think?”

“The average fertility rate was 1.9 children per mother in 1990 and… 1.5 in 2000,” Chu Wanning said, narrowing his eyes in thought, and even Mo Ran was astonished this time. “An average of 1.7. 811 mothers and 1379 children is 2190, so that would be a total compensation of 21 billion, 900 million yuan.”

“Let’s call it a straight 22 billion,” Nangong Xu said. “Transaction fees and all that. So, Professor Calculator, you’ve obviously got an interest in this. What percentage is that of Guyueye’s net-worth?”

“4.4 percent,” Chu Wanning said. He stared, unblinking, at Nangong Xu.

“There you go! 4.4 percent. That wouldn’t *cripple* the company. That’d be like breaking… One more question – how many bones, out of 206?”

Chu Wanning shook his head.

“Don’t you know? I thought that one would be easier,” Nangong Xu said. He approached Chu Wanning, waving his gun nonchalantly. “Go on. How many bones?” When Chu Wanning refused to answer, his smile widened. “All right. No problem. How many guests are here, and how many would constitute 4.4 percent? I know there’s about a hundred here, so… four or five?”

Chu Wanning was looking at the gun. “Nine. Nine bones.”

“Nine bones. See? Pretty simple arithmetic for you; clearly you just had a bit of a mental block for a moment. Nine bones. Five, please bring Mr. Wan through to the President’s Drawing Room and break nine of his bones. Dealer’s choice for the first eight, but the last one should be his skull.”

“Sure thing.”

“No!” Wan Jinhai wailed. “No, this isn’t fair! I didn’t order it, I didn’t think it up! The share-holders- you can’t *do* this!”

“This is perfectly fair,” Nangong Xu said. “This is justice.”

“This isn’t justice,” Chu Wanning said. “It’s sadism.”

Why won’t you shut the fuck up?! Mo Ran wanted to scream, as he had once before. *For once in your fucking life, why can’t you just* stop talking*?!*

Nangong Xu turned to look back at him. "'Sadism' is a very harsh word. Shouldn't one take pleasure in seeing justice done? 'A gentleman considers justice to be essential in everything.'"

"Finish the quote," Chu Wanning replied. "'He practices it according to the principles of propriety. He brings it forth in modesty.'"

"Take him out," Nangong Xu said casually to the man holding onto the struggling Wan Jinhai, and then backhanded Chu Wanning sharply across the face.

Chu Wanning, unable to block the blow with his hands tied behind his back, fell like a stone. He disappeared from view behind the crowd of hostages; Mo Ran tried to move forward, but was stopped by the gun casually laid across his chest.

"Your boyfriend's going to get his teeth kicked in," his captor said conversationally, and then the thud of flesh hitting flesh and Chu Wanning's soft noise of pain electrified Mo Ran from his scalp to his soles. "Though maybe you wouldn't mind that?"

Nangong Xu's head was still visible, but there was the sound of another blow. There was no accompanying sound of pain this time. Mo Ran had never felt more useless in his life – even when his mother had been dying, he'd been able to steal painkillers, massage her legs, spoon water between her cracked lips. Tell her how much he loved her.

"Get him up," Nangong Xu said, and one of his cronies hauled Chu Wanning to his feet. There was a small trickle of blood at his hairline, and his lip was split, but he looked *angry*.

"There is *nothing* I hate more," Nangong Xu said, finger in Chu Wanning's face, "than self-righteous cunts who want to be heroes. Nothing. All your *propriety, modesty, integrity, justice* bullshit. All it does is piss me off, do you understand?"

"Oh, *perfectly*," Chu Wanning said archly, and was rewarded with another violent blow across the face. This time he didn't fall, but only because the man behind him caught him and held him upright.

Then there was a long, high shriek from another room.

Mo Ran felt the familiar acid sting of bile in the back of his throat, and there was a buzzing of hornets in his ears. In front of him were at least twenty shaking screens of phones recording this ordeal.

Chu Wanning had gone pale, and his eyes had gone to the room where, presumably, Wan Jinhai had just had a bone broken.

Nangong Xu drew his attention back by patting his reddened cheek. “Exactly. So don’t speak until you’re fucking spoken to, hm?”

Mu Huohan chose this moment to make a desperate bid for freedom: a feeble knock of his bound hands against the abdomen of the man holding him, who didn’t even grunt as he pulled Mu Huohan back.

“Let go! Let go of me!”

“Now!” Nangong Xu said, resuming his position on the stairs. “The next defendant. Mu Huohan, you’ll recognise this format, I’m sure.”

“You’re a disgrace!” Mu Huohan said as his own guard shoved him forwards. “What the hell gives you the right to do this?”

Nangong Xu held out his hands. “*Vae victis*. Chu Wanning, you may speak: translate for me.”

“Go to hell,” Chu Wanning said, to Mo Ran’s dismay; another blow about the head, this time from behind.

He really was the dumbest bitch alive, Mo Ran thought. He'd fallen totally and irrevocably in love with someone who had the same instinct for self-preservation as a suicidal samurai.

"It means 'woe to the conquered'. I have you at my mercy, and that is what gives me the right," Nangong Xu explained, as though to a five-year-old. "Just like you've always had looking down from your throne at all the people you've sentenced to death. How many, in your career? Two hundred? Three hundred?"

When Mu Huohan didn't answer, Nangong Xu affected an expression of surprise. "Don't tell me you don't remember?"

"They were criminals! They were traitors, rapists, murderers-"

"Ah! So, you agree that rapists and murderers deserve the death penalty. Hm." When Mu Huohan paled, Nangong Xu grinned. "Now, we *could* discuss your complicity in crimes like those of our friend in the drawing room, your corruption, the ease with which you handed out grossly unjust sentences, but we only have hours, not days! So I have been asked to charge you with two specific crimes: the rape and murder of your wife."

"Who are you?" Mu Huohan breathed. "Who are you working for?"

"I'm not working for anyone. This is a favour for a colleague. So, your dear wife – ah, I should say, your second wife, actually, as you divorced her predecessor when she detailed some rather shocking allegations of domestic violence. All hushed up by your legal friends, of course. Now, on the night in question, you were in bed with your young second wife, having the very violent sex you prefer, when she cried out in agony! Why? Because she had BBS, very severe BBS, and you had just broken her pelvis."

Mu Huohan shook his head. "You're lying. He's lying!"

"Most men, I assume, would stop at this point, but you… You became almost frenzied," Nangong Xu said. "The louder she screamed, the harder she tried to fight you off, the more excited you became. It aroused you. The pain she was in, the power you felt – just exhilarating, wasn't it?"

“He’s making this up! This is some sick fantasy of his!”

“She tried bucking you off, but she was such a delicate, dainty thing. She tried to push you away, and you didn’t like that. How dare she deny you, after everything you'd given her? So you put her hand on her throat to force her down until you finished. Maybe you were too excited. I’ve heard from so many women that you like it when they struggle. Maybe you squeezed just a little too hard… But then when you’d finally satisfied yourself on her broken body she wasn’t moving, was she?”

Mu Huohan’s face was grey. He looked helplessly at the assembled hostages, and blinked at the field of angry stars, all recording him.

“Your young son witnessed the whole thing,” Nangong Xu said. His voice, hitherto jovial, was shaking with his fury. “He saw you rape and murder his mother, so he never believed your nonsense about sepsis. But what could he do, against a judge? His own father? He had his little brother and big sister to think about. So it’s been a very long time coming for you, Judge Mu… but you know what they say about how revenge should be served.”

Nangong Xu turned to his captive audience. “Obviously, we will be passing the death sentence. But, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is that enough? You’ve seen the justice that this court prefers. And Mu Huohan raped someone with a broken pelvis... Hm. Chu Wanning, I would guess that you’ve read Dante – would you care to explain *contrapasso* to the jury?”

“You’re sick,” Chu Wanning said matter-of-factly.

Nangong Xu sighed. “I made a promise not to kill you. Right now, I very much want to break that promise. You wanted justice, and now you take issue with how I dispense it? You ungrateful son of a bitch… From now on, every time you are rude, every time you refuse to engage, I will kill a random hostage.”

“Just answer his fucking question!” one of the men shouted.

Chu Wanning looked thoughtful for a second. “It literally means ‘to suffer against’,” he began, as though at the front of his lecture hall, “although it could also be translated as ‘counterpoise’. It is a form of retaliatory justice wherein the punishment fits the sin in a symbolic or ironic fashion.”

Nangong Xu smiled sweetly. “Precisely. So, Judge Mu-”

“For example,” Chu Wanning interrupted. “False prophets have their heads twisted backwards, because they claimed they could see forwards in time.”

“Yes, fine-” said Nangong Xu.

“And hypocrites wear golden robes that are lead within, crushing them slowly as they’re forced to walk backwards and forwards over the judges staked to the ground, forever. That, as a hypocrite, would be your punishment.”

Well, fuck, thought Mo Ran.

Nangong Xu stared in astonishment at Chu Wanning for a long moment. “How am I a hypocrite?” he asked. His voice was dangerously soft.

“You’re punishing crimes against women. But you’re terrorising women as well.” Chu Wanning looked at him steadily. “At least let them go. You’ll still have plenty of witnesses.”

“You really just can’t stop yourself, can you?” Nangong Xu said quietly, but there was something new in his voice. He looked around the room, eyes lingering on the women present. “I can’t let them go. They’ll call the police.”

“We won’t!” a woman in a blue suit cried out immediately. “We promise, we absolutely won’t!”

“We won’t!”

"Why just the women?!" one man was shouting. "We don't deserve this either! Don't listen to him, you can't just let the women go and not us!"

“Please! We promise!”

“As I said,” Nangong Xu shouted over them. “Everyone, man or woman, is safe as long as you behave yourselves!”

“Then you’re a liar too,” Chu Wanning said evenly. “You just said you’d kill a hostage at random. Their good behaviour is no guarantee of safety.”

“Just shut up, you arrogant bastard!” one of the male hostages screamed. Several of the women were sobbing in fear.

Nangong Xu looked between them and Chu Wanning. Mo Ran stood on his tiptoes, desperate to study his expression.

“Hm,” Nangong Xu said, apparently to himself. He went right up to Chu Wanning, and gripped his chin. Chu Wanning stared back at him, his eyes like frost on a sword. “Hm… Perhaps I can see it after all. It would be fun, breaking you.”

There was another long wail from the drawing room.

“All right,” Nangong Xu said, and then, suddenly, threw back his head and roared with laughter. “All right! You win. I won’t say I’m immune to a little logic, and while I despise heroism I can’t help but respect the balls on you. Six, take Judge Mu upstairs, cut off his penis, and let him bleed out.”

Mu Huohan was dragged by one of Nangong Xu's men up the stairs, screaming and begging all the way. The noise from the hostages was rising to an unbearable pitch of terror and horror.

"Quiet, quiet, quiet!" Nangong Xu said.

He held up his hands. He smiled.

"We still have my dear brother, the incoming Mayor of Shanghai, to deal with, but I suppose we might as well speed things along. So I would like a volunteer to stay and film. The rest of you may leave."

Chapter 53: Riding the Tiger

Chapter Summary

> Hello all! I'm sorry this chapter took so long; the last two weeks have been really, really fucking hard. I'm hugely burnt-out, and I reread your comments so many times to give myself little bursts of motivation. You have no idea how much they mean to me, thank you. ❤️ Without them, I think it'd be another two weeks before I was able to write again!

Nangong Xu's offer unleashed hell.

There was a mad dash for the door; antique furniture was shoved out of the way, sounding long scrapes across the parquet floor, bunching up the silk carpets, tripping the unwary. One woman was pushed to the side, falling against a chair; another was sent sprawling as her high-heel broke under her. She shrieked in pain and panic, and screamed again as someone stepped on her hand in his hurry to get to the door.

Nangong Xu sat down on the stairs and pulled off his shoes and his socks. Then he tossed them into the heaving crowd, laughing when one shoe bounced off a man's head.

"I've been shot! I've been shot!"

"Unlock the fucking door!"

"He said women first! Let me go, women first, get the fuck out of the way!"

"Let me out, let me out-"

"He's going to change his mind – no, get back, I was first!"

Across the sea of bobbing heads, Mo Ran saw Nangong Xu sidle up to Chu Wanning and whisper in his ear. Mo Ran imagined that he was asking exactly what Mo Ran himself was thinking.

These are the people you risked your life for? These entitled, cowardly, selfish people who'll trample each other to save themselves, and not even spare a thought for what's going to happen to you? The people who have made the last few years of your life a misery, who called you a traitor and mentally ill and a Japanese bastard and everything else besides? Why do you give a shit whether they live or die? Why do you even try to save them?

Chu Wanning was watching the chaos by the door with a solemn expression, his sword-brows flat, a slight line in between them. As the crowd thinned, and Chu Wanning was finally able to meet his eyes across the room, Mo Ran fancied he could hear the reply he was giving to Nangong Xu.

Are you done?

There was another wail from Wan Jinhai, and then, almost immediately afterwards, a long shriek from upstairs. It set off a cacophony of panic in reply from the crowd that still remained in the room, fighting each other to go through the door first.

Mo Ran tugged the knot of his bow tie loose and undid the top button of the shirt.

Chu Wanning frowned, and indicated the door with his eyes.

Mo Ran smiled in apology.

"*Go,*" Chu Wanning mouthed, and jerked his head in the direction of the door. "*Go!*"

He watched realisation spread across Chu Wanning's beautiful face like an oil spill.

“No!” he shouted, throwing caution to the wind. “Get the hell out of here!”

Nangong Xu followed his gaze and looked at Mo Ran with open delight. “Oh, I was hoping it’d be you.”

“It’s not!” Chu Wanning snarled.

“He’s volunteered.”

“I’m un-volunteering him! He’s going!”

Nangong Xu pulled a black duffel bag from under the stairs and rummaged through it. The last woman staggered out of the door on her broken high-heel, and the closest guard shut it behind her.

“Don’t shut the door! That idiot’s useless, someone else can film. I’ll film!” Chu Wanning stared at Mo Ran with eyes ablaze. “Piss off, *now*!”

The pain in his throat was like glass. “Sorry, Shizun.”

Nangong Xu pulled a roll of duct tape out of the bag and tossed it to the man holding Chu Wanning. “I’m bored of him. Shut him up.”

“No!” Chu Wanning said, blanching as he struggled and his injured arm was pulled. “Don’t-Ngmh!”

The guard gripped Chu Wanning’s jaw to force his mouth closed, crushing his split lip, and stretched the duct tape across it. The harsh sound ripped through the room as he wound it around Chu Wanning’s head once, twice, three times, then tore it off.

Mo Ran remembered Chu Wanning's fury when Mo Ran had tried to defend him in Yuliang. *"Can you hear me grunting, hmm? Making animal noises? No? Then I can speak for myself!"*

Once, a thousand years ago, the morning after Shi Mei told him that Chu Wanning had assaulted him, Mo Ran had seen Chu Wanning with a pen between his teeth. Even in the midst of his righteous rage, he'd indulged in momentarily imagining Chu Wanning gagged, eyes scared and furious, and the thought had instantly aroused him.

The reality was very, very different.

He was going to kill Nangong Xu, he thought, and the thought made no impression whatsoever on his face.

"There," Nangong Xu said. "Now we can talk without being rudely interrupted. The young professor's been very careful not to use your name in his exhortations, but perhaps you'd honour us with it?"

"Sure. My name's Mo Ran."

Chu Wanning made a muffled sound of fury and tried to move forward; the man guarding him gripped him by the back of the neck and pulled him back, as easily as if he were a recalcitrant cat.

"Mo Ran. I know that name… Oh! You were the student he carried out, yes?"

"That's me," he said, posture relaxed, allowing a hint of a Fujian accent into his voice and dropping his 'r's. It had been the fashion among the small-bit criminals he'd run for to pretend to be more eastern than they really were, to imply they were linked to more established organisations. It felt like putting on an old jacket, the leather worn and soft and thick enough to turn a blade away. "I was the idiot who opened the parcel. I'd be dead if he hadn't taken the brunt of it. Nails in the face."

I'm just like you, he tried to project. *Not just like* you*, oh no, I could never claim that. But I've been a criminal. I've been shat on and kicked around and I'm uncomfortable in a place like this. I'm not a police officer or a billionaire or a genius-hero. I'm one of the pathetic kids your minions' minions' minions might use like a piece of tissue paper.*

"That would have been a shame."

Nangong Liu stared at Mo Ran with a slack jaw.

"I was also there when Officer Nangong came to the hospital, and said that he'd received a note accusing his father of having sent it."

"Ah, yes," Nangong Xu said. "That was me, of course."

"Yeah, we worked that out," Mo Ran said, gesturing between himself and Chu Wanning. "Wait, let me film this. You sent a note to Nangong Si accusing his father of being the one who sent the bomb to Chu Wanning's laboratory in Sichuan. How did you know it was Nangong Liu?"

Nangong Xu beamed at him, visibly delighted by Mo Ran playing his part so well. "It's very simple, actually. For the last twenty years, Nangong Liu has retained the services of a very discreet, very amoral 'fixer' by the name of Xu Shuanglin. Every time he wanted a story about a rival leaked to the press, every time he wanted something disappeared, every time he needed to pay someone off, it was all done through Xu Shuanglin."

Nangong Liu's face was grey. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"No? For example, on the night you murdered your wife, you contacted Xu Shuanglin to pay off Detectives Li Jiahoa – 0456217 – and Chen Mingtao – 0458234 – of Linyi, for compromising the crime scene and threatening the single witness of the event. That's from the July 2010 folder, for anyone who wants to read that."

Nangong Xu gestured to Chu Wanning; he'd stopped struggling, frozen still, and was listening with wide eyes.

"The single witness was, of course, sixteen-year-old Chu Wanning... I waylaid your recording, by the way – very sweet, trying to trick him into confessing at the funeral. Very naïve. That's been uploaded too, I hope you don't mind. *My name is Dr Chu Wanning. The date is the 4th of August 2010.* So cute! Like a little detective. Just like your student talks like a little criminal."

Mo Ran shrugged in acknowledgement.

"My brother never did confess, did he? You got nothing from him. He could have left it, and maintained that she fell. But the number of anonymous stories he made Xu Shuanglin leak for him – about your autism, about your guardian, all of it. The lengths he went to, to pressure the prosecutors to charge you with sabotage after the civil trial found in your favour. More leaks, more pressure. He tipped off the Ministry of State Security that you were trying to flee the country, you know. That's why they arrested you and you spent those months in RSDL. And you slithered free every time. But it all paints a picture, doesn't it? Why was he *so* desperate to silence you, years after you'd last met?"

"It's a lie," Nangong Liu whispered. "It's all lies."

"*All* of the communications between Nangong Liu and Xu Shuanglin have been released as part of the cache of evidence I've provided online tonight," Nangong Xu said. "They never met in person, so everything was conducted via telephone calls – all recorded – text messages, e-mails…"

"And he was working for you all along?" Nangong Si said.

Nangong Xu laughed. "He *was* me!"

"No," Nangong Liu moaned. "No, no, no-"

“If you want something done, you have to do it yourself. I was very good at it too. *Yes, sir, no, sir, whatever you like, sir.* He paid me very well for my services too. Seed money for my other little ventures.”

“You sent the bomb?” Mo Ran asked.

“No, no. A nail bomb, really? No, I was the middleman. If *I’d* tried to kill Chu Wanning, he wouldn’t be here. No, I contracted a rookie do it – then if he died, it was murder, and if not, it was still attempted murder. I personally didn’t care either way. The paper trail was the important thing.”

“Is it true?” Mo Ran said. He focused his camera on his father. “Did you ask for Chu Wanning to be killed?”

“Of course not!” Nangong Liu said. “This is all- this is all-”

“This is all pathetic,” Nangong Si said. He had been crying, quietly; Mo Ran didn’t know for how long.

Mo Ran turned his phone to focus on Nangong Si’s face instead, closing in so that the tears were caught, but he addressed Nangong Xu.

“Was his son Nangong Si aware of any of this?”

“No. He believed everything his father told him. I’ve also been unable to find any evidence of corruption in his work as a police officer. He was intending to make an accusation against his father tonight, just after his Mayorship was announced, but his evidence was… lacking. He was disadvantaged by knowing nothing about Xu Shuanglin, after all.”

“Are you going to let him go, then?” Mo Ran pressed.

“No. I thought I’d give my brother a choice. To watch his son die, or die himself.”

Nangong Liu sucked down a deep breath.

“Pfft.” Mo Ran looked around the face-masked waiters. “I mean, I think we all know who he’d pick there. And he’s young enough to have another kid. It’s not very good contra-whatsit. That ironic punishment thing.”

“Maybe I should make him watch his line be extinguished before he dies.”

Chu Wanning made a muffled sound of outraged denial; he tried to pull forward again, and was yanked back by his injured arm.

Nangong Si made no sound at all.

Mo Ran laughed.

Nangong Xu blinked, truly surprised for the first time that night. “You think it’s an amusing punishment?”

Mo Ran dropped the bullshit street-criminal swagger, and grinned. “I think it’s a futile one. How can you erase your brother’s line by killing just one person? Now who’s naïve?”

Nangong Xu narrowed his eyes, and smiled. “Who are you?”

“Mo Ran.”

“I didn’t ask what your name was, I asked who the fuck you were.”

Mo Ran stopped the recording and lowered the phone. “I’ll tell you if you let him go.”

“Why does it matter to you?”

“He’s not done anything. You said so.”

“He’s a police officer. If you’d earnt that persona you were attempting to perform for me, that should be enough to warrant his death.”

“I earnt it. I just outgrew it. But some of this at least is revenge for Nangong Liu killing Rong Yan, right? You’re killing Mu Huohan because he killed his wife, your colleague’s mother. So, it’d be fair to let Nangong Si go as well, right? He might be your brother’s son, but he’s also Rong Yan’s.”

“A fair point,” Nangong Xu said. “But an appeal to ethos, not logos. Why would killing him be futile?”

“Because Nangong Liu’s a serial adulterer. He’s got other kids running around the place.”

Nangong Xu stared at him for a long moment. He looked at his brother. Then he looked at Nangong Si, and back at Mo Ran.

A ghastly rictus began to spread across his face. “Ahh, yes. I did want to ask. What is that you said to my brother earlier that so disturbed him?”

“I think you’ve guessed. I told him who my mother was. From that he extrapolated who I was. And who my father was.”

There. He'd said it. He was past the point of no return now. He looked at Chu Wanning, who looked back at him in confused disbelief. He wondered if he'd ever get the chance to explain.

Mo Ran looked back at Nangong Xu. "He killed my mother too, in a way. He gave her HPV. It turned to cancer, after she got BBS. She died from it. We lived on the streets. She never had any chemotherapy. When she was dying she begged him for help, and he called her a whore."

"Why should I not just kill you as well?" Nangong Xu asked.

"If I'm here, there's every possibility there's some other little bastard running around," Mo Ran said. "I have a gege. Maybe we have a jiejie or a meimei too. Maybe there's a whole raft of us. But you'd never know, so you'd be sacrificing justice for an imperfect punishment. So in the interest of justice, I'm asking you to let Nangong Si go."

"As I said," Nangong Xu replied. His voice cracked through the silence. "I'm not immune to logic. And I appreciate the aesthetic sense behind the request. So, you think that in the interests of justice, I should compensate Nangong Si for the death of his mother with his life?"

"Yeah. But if you do decide to choose justice," Mo Ran said carefully, "I want it too. A life for a life. He took my mother too, so I want you to spare a life for hers."

"Yours?" Nangong Xu smiled. "You could have just left."

"Not mine," Mo Ran said. "Chu Wanning's."

"Nmh!" Chu Wanning shook his head so violently that some locks of hair came down from his bun, and blood dripped from his cheek over his gag, staining his white shirt.

"Hm. Why?"

“He saved my life. I owe him.”

“Ah…” Nangong Xu wagged his finger. “Don’t lie to me. A debt of gratitude doesn’t involve hiding his eyes or covering his ears. Protecting the autistic from the loud sounds, how very considerate… Is Professor Chu Wanning perhaps not as righteous as he likes to pretend to be? Is he having sex with his student?”

“I fucking wish,” Mo Ran said. “Not for my lack of trying.”

Nangong Xu laughed. “Taking a while for you to wear him down?”

“You have no idea.”

“I might,” Nangong Xu replied. “But I’m not sure. Your accusation is rather more… indirect. It certainly wasn't pre-meditated murder.”

“Does that matter?” Mo Ran said. “I watched him call her a gold-digging, delusional whore. I watched him threaten her with arrest, if she ever contacted him – or his wife and son. She gave up. She died within a month. He didn’t push her down the stairs, but he killed her just as much as he killed Luo Fenghua.”

He had thought that this was his trump card, but the second he mentioned that name, Mo Ran realised that he had just made a terrible mistake.

There was no longer any hint of enjoyment of the argument on Nangong Xu's face, no delight in the scandal, no amused magnanimity of the conqueror. All of the masks dropped from his face and shattered like invisible porcelain on the floor. All that was left was an expression of stony rage.

“You think that your mother was like Luo Fenghua?” he asked delicately. “You think that the humiliation, the shame, that she endured… That it was in any way comparable?”

“She was in a lot of pain,” Mo Ran said. “The cancer-”

“I don’t give a fuck about your whore mother’s cancer!” Nangong Xu suddenly shouted. He turned around, and looked at Nangong Si. “You. Rong Yan, how did she die? Hmm?”

“He pushed her down the stairs,” Nangong Si said, confused.

“No! How *exactly* did she die?”

Nangong Si looked at Chu Wanning. “Her… her neck was broken.”

“Her neck was broken. Do you know, Mo Ran, how Luo Fenghua died? You must do. You clearly know so very much.”

He’d fucked up. “He killed himself.”

“He hanged himself,” Nangong Xu said, and there was a ghost-light in his eyes. “So he broke his neck as well. Contrapasso…”

“No,” Nangong Liu said. “Xu’er, didi, you- you can’t – please, I’ll give you everything I have, everything-“

Nangong Xu had gone back to the discarded duffel bag, from which he drew a long, white rope. He whistled to the man on the mezzanine, and tossed one end of it up over the bannister rail.

Nangong Liu wailed. “Help me! Si’er, please, I’m so sorry, I killed her, but I raised you, I love you-!”

Nangong Xu looked at Mo Ran. “What do you think? Enough contrapasso for you?”

Mo Ran nodded silently.

“Oh, *good*. I’m so glad that *you’re* pleased. I’m so glad that *you* approve. You who clearly knows so fucking much about me and my family. But…” He pulled out something else from the bag. A tiny bottle, and a syringe. “*I* think that’s too fucking quick.”

“What’s that? Xu’er?” Nangong Liu said as his brother prepared the syringe. “What is it?”

“This was made for me by my colleague. A fast-acting paralytic,” he said, and without ceremony he plunged the needle into Nangong Liu’s neck.

He turned back to Mo Ran. “So who should the noose be for, hm? Your brother? Or… You brought up Luo Fenghua. My teacher. My teacher, whom I loved,” he said, and his eyes fell on Chu Wanning.

“No!” Mo Ran shouted. He tried to run at Nangong Xu, but there were now more guards than hostages, and two of them pulled him back, locking his arms.

“Oh, definitely hot for teacher, then.”

Nangong Liu slumped to the floor as his legs gave out beneath him.

“I’ll do it! Hang me! I don’t care!”

“Neither do I!” Nangong Xu said with a mad laugh. “I didn’t give a fuck about you, until you decided to try to manipulate me. Until *you* decided to bring up… How funny. You and I are quite alike, aren’t we? One brother has nothing and becomes a criminal; one brother has

everything, and becomes a figure of authority, the perfect puppet of the State. And both of us… You're a scientist. So was I, before all this. Before my brother ruined my life. I've always wondered what would have happened, if I'd reached Fenghua just a little earlier. Would I have been able to save him?"

He looked at Chu Wanning. "Shall we test the hypothesis?"

Chapter 54: The Hanged Man

Chapter Notes

Serious content warnings for this one: torture, hanging, strangulation, blood, suicide.

Life had a cruel sense of humour.

Nine months ago, Chu Wanning had fumbled with a long stretch of bandage, trying to make a noose. But his mittened hands were bound and clumsy, and without free fingers he just couldn't make a knot. He kept dropping the bandage, until just picking it up from the bed was enough to make him faint. But the nurses' shift would change soon, and the window of opportunity would pass.

He'd given up on it then, and had made a torturous ascent to the hospital roof instead.

Now he watched as Nangong Xu made a noose with ease, almost grace. He'd chosen a hangman's knot, and Chu Wanning watched as he made eight coils around the bend.

Nangong Xu saw him watching and grinned. "Hmm…" Then he added a ninth coil.

Nine coils meant that he wanted it to take longer. Every coil added friction, Chu Wanning thought, rioting memories of knot theory and material engineering in his head. Harder to loosen, but harder to tighten as well. Eight was the number of prosperity, but nine… Nine was the number of the Emperor. Nine bestowments; nine familial exterminations. The power to reward or to punish…

"You can't do this!" Mo Ran said; he was struggling so much that he was giving two men real trouble in restraining him. "He hasn't done anything wrong, he doesn't deserve this!"

“Neither did Fenghua,” Nangong Xu said.

“I’m sorry! I should never have mentioned him!”

“Stop your whining!” Nangong Xu snapped. “You brought this on yourself. *This* is contrapasso, boy. If you think that you can manipulate me with the image of my teacher hanging in front of me, then you can feel exactly what I felt. No… no, not exactly, because you still have a chance to save his life. See how merciful I am?”

“I know, I know, you’re right! You’re right, it was a shit thing to do, but punish me for it!”

“But this *is* punishment for you, isn’t it? How brave you were a minute ago, so confident and swaggering and full of yourself, and now how desperate…” Nangong Xu looked at Chu Wanning. “Just like you, when he stayed behind. Logic went out of the window then, didn’t it?”

Chu Wanning stared back at him. Being furious with Nangong Xu was like being furious with a force of nature, with a storm or a fire. He was furious with *himself*, for speaking so much earlier, and now he was gagged, unable to reassure or comfort or thank Mo Ran with his final words.

Always saying too much at the wrong time. Always silent in the wrong moments.

Nangong Xu looked disappointed by the lack of reaction. He placed the noose around Chu Wanning’s neck like it was an Olympic medal, and tightened it almost tenderly. “There,” he said, freeing a lock of hair that had come down from his topknot. “Don’t want that to pull.”

Chu Wanning gave him a flat look of contempt. He didn’t know what would be kinder – to look at Mo Ran, or to spare him the image of his final expression.

“I’m sorry, Wanning, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry-”

The decision was made for him. Chu Wanning looked at Mo Ran and tried to smile with his eyes, the way he'd practiced as a child, and shook his head.

"You're only going to have a few seconds," Nangong Xu said to Mo Ran, who was crying, shaking with rage. "Opening a can of Coke takes twenty pounds of pressure. Swinging open a door takes ten pounds. That force for ten seconds on both the carotid arteries and he'll lose consciousness. But *half* that for ten seconds on the jugular will do the same. I did all the maths. Worked it all out. My career trajectory gave me plenty of opportunity to test it all as well. Of course, if he loses consciousness, he's going to be a dead weight, and after that it's just a matter of time. It's interesting, isn't it? Like a logic puzzle."

He couldn't panic. If he panicked, he'd hyperventilate, and then he'd pass out anyway, even without any pressure on his neck.

The body is a bodhi tree; the mind is like a mirror… He used to recite it, when he had to calm himself down from a meltdown. The body is a bodhi tree… If only. If his body really was a tree, then it would just grow around the rope, swallow it, make it invisible. Make it so that Mo Ran couldn't see it.

"Don't do this, don't do this! *Uncle!*" Nangong Si was crying out.

"Go!"

There was no time to draw a breath; one second Chu Wanning was standing, trying to make sure his legs didn't buckle, and in the next there was excruciating pain in his neck. Within just that one second it was all-encompassing – throbbing violently against his temples, roaring in his ears.

But it wasn't the pain that undid him; by now he was very used to pain. It was the panic.

He was going to die, he *knew*, with absolute certainty: he was about to die, this was how he died, he was *going to die*. After the bomb he had been able to move, able to drag himself, to

bring Mo Ran to safety, but this was pure and utter helplessness. There was nothing he could do but kick against the empty air and die.

Then his foot kicked against something solid, and someone lifted him up to an airy heaven.

"I'm here, I'm here, I'm here!" Mo Ran sobbed beneath him. He was holding Chu Wanning around his calves, his shins braced against his left shoulder. "You've just got to stay upright, baobei – you've got to stand up."

The agony in his neck and temples was still there, but the pressure had eased just a little; enough for some consciousness to pierce the red haze. Chu Wanning's burning scapulas were braced against the floor of the mezzanine level, and his core muscles were already straining. But he wasn't hanging by his neck anymore. It was a position that would soon become unbearable, but he could breathe.

Theoretically. The gag meant that he could only breathe through his nose, and he was hyperventilating. If he passed out, Mo Ran wouldn't be able to hold him high enough…

Bodhi tree. Mirror. Death.

"Please, Wanning, just breathe, slow down, you have to *breathe*-"

He tried. He inhaled as the tree and exhaled as the mirror, but his body was desperate for oxygen, and Mo Ran would tire and drop him, it was taking him too long, why was he so weak, why was he so useless-?

"Take your time. Wanning. Wanning, baobei, listen to me. Take your time." Below him, Mo Ran was trying to inject confidence into his own voice. "I can hold you like this for ages. You're light as anything. Don't be- Just, just think of my cousin, yeah? Always laughing at me for going to the gym. So this is easy for me. You just need to breathe for me, okay? Please. You're doing so well. So well. Just breathe. With me. In. Out. Like that. In. Out."

It was easier then, to follow Mo Ran's orders, than to try to regulate his breathing on his own. Gradually, second by second, the agony in his chest lessened, the vice around his lungs eased. More oxygen brought more clarity, which brought more pain, but below him Mo Ran was as steady as a rock, holding his legs tightly braced. It was awkward, but he could do it. He could stand like this, trusting that Mo Ran wouldn't drop him.

In, out. Bodhi tree, mirror. More oxygen, more clarity, more pain.

He could feel it in his thighs and his abdomen now. The pain in his scapula was more like magma than fire, solidifying into something heavy and tangible. Mo Ran had stabilised him, but there was no way he could free him…

"Mhm." Chu Wanning tried to twist his bound hands to reach into his left pocket, but it was too far. His scapula *screamed*, and for a second he blacked out; he couldn't see, but he heard Mo Ran's cry of terror as he bent.

Okay. Okay. Not possible then.

"Mhm," he said again, and clicked his fingers. He eased his hands an inch to the left and clicked them again.

"Left? Move left?"

"Nnn." He risked another inch, and the stretch in his shoulder made sweat pour down his back, but he didn't black out.

He clicked his fingers again.

"Left – left pocket?!"

"Mhm!"

“Okay. Okay. I’ve got you braced; just carry on leaning your shins on my shoulder, okay? I’m going to use my right arm, but I’ve got you.”

Chu Wanning felt his heart blanch in terror as the grip around his legs loosened, but then he felt the tug on his trousers as Mo Ran stretched up to reach his hand into it.

“Boys, boys, is this *really* the time?” Nangong Xu said somewhere in amusement. “Is this what gets you going? Perverts.”

Then Mo Ran’s fingers found it, and he laughed. “You genius!” he cried. “You *fucking genius-!*”

Two White Rabbit sweets came out with it, one bouncing off Mo Ran’s forehead, but he had it: Chu Wanning’s Leatherman Wave multi-tool, always carried in case he found something he couldn’t help but fix or take apart.

Nangong Si laughed as well. “Yes!”

“Oh!” Nangong Xu also sounded… delighted.

“I need to bring you down an inch,” Mo Ran said. “Just an inch… There. Okay, I’m going to hold it, and you need to find the right tool, okay?”

Easy. Open it up for the pliers, and inside them were wire cutters that would slice through the zip ties.

Easier said than done, with hands tied behind one’s back in a suspended stress pose. But Mo Ran’s hand was holding it too, and so Chu Wanning was careful. Better to take a few extra seconds than drop the-

At the exact moment Chu Wanning cut through the tie, he heard Wan Jinhai shriek in pain.

The blood poured back into his hands like a thousand rivulets of needles.

And the Leatherman fell to the ground.

"*Fuck!*"

Chu Wanning tried to look for it, to no avail. But one of the waiter-dressed criminals was in his eyeline, and was looking to underneath the mezzanine; it must have bounced there.

"Wanning," Mo Ran said below him. "It's- it's too far. I'm going to have to- Just for a second-"

"Mmm." Chu Wanning nodded, and flexed the fingers of his right hand. He hadn't tried to do a pull-up since the explosion, practice which he was sorely regretting the lack of now. See, physiotherapists? That's what happened when you *took things slowly* and were *mindful of your limitations*. It's like they'd never even considered that he might need to hold himself up with one hand or be strangled to death in a sadistic game invented by a madman.

Chu Wanning gripped the bottom of one of the spindles of the mezzanine's balustrade. It was thick oak, treated with beeswax, but if Mo Ran lifted him a little…

Mo Ran saw what he was trying to do, and hoisted him up, letting Chu Wanning stand on his shoulders. Chu Wanning wrapped his right arm around the base of the spindle, leaving the length of white rope between the handrail and the noose slack.

"Mm!"

Mo Ran ducked, diving for the Leatherman in the corner to where it had skittered. Sweat dripped down Chu Wanning's face from the exertion and the unpractised posture, but he

could hold it; it felt like an hour, even though it probably wasn't more than six seconds.

Mo Ran gripped his ankles and maneuvered them to stand on his shoulders. "I've got you! I'm going to lower you down again, okay? Exactly like we were before. I'll pass you the thing, and then lift you again. Okay?"

"Mm."

"Okay. Right. Left leg first…"

It was viscerally terrifying, to place all his weight on Mo Ran again, to lower himself down, every muscle screaming in pain. His left knee was against Mo Ran's cheek.

Mo Ran passed up the Leatherman, and even though the knife-blades could be accessed with one hand, Chu Wanning's were shaking so much he used two. He checked that the serrated blade was locked, and then scored a line through the layers of duct-tape over his mouth, aiming between his lips. His mouth filled with the taste of iron, but he was finally able to draw a real breath.

It would take less time and energy to cut through the length than try to move or cut the nine coils of the noose. But it meant he had to go higher again to reach it.

"Okay," he said softly. "Lift me again. I'm going to grab the rope with my right hand. It needs to be taut."

"Okay," Mo Ran said. "Okay, okay – on my shoulders again?"

"Please."

It was like a slow performance in the world's worst circus. Mo Ran must have been in agony at this point as well, as he slowly lifted Chu Wanning up again onto his shoulders.

Normally he would have made the rope taut with his left hand and sawed with his right, but Chu Wanning knew that his left shoulder wouldn't be able to take the strain if he slipped. So he looped his right arm around the base of the spindle again, and gripped the rope above his head.

It was an awkward angle, and he needed the knot of the noose at the right side of his neck. He had no choice but to twist it around, scoring a fiery line into his skin, but then he could both hold himself up with his arm and pull the rope taut with the fingers of his right hand.

The rope was quite thick, but unlike his living space, Chu Wanning kept his tools in perfect order. The Leatherman's serrated blade locked smoothly and was razor-sharp. He was going to write the most glowing review in the world, he thought hysterically.

It felt like he was sawing through his own shoulder instead of the rope, and every movement tore the skin around his neck.

Then, all in an instant, the rope snapped; the blade sliced through the skin of Chu Wanning's hand like butter, but he was half-prepared for it, and he managed to keep his arm around the spindle. "It's free!" he bubbled through a mouthful of blood.

"Yes!" Mo Ran said below him, just as wetly.

Chu Wanning carefully unlocked the blade, slid it closed, and put the Leatherman back into his pocket. He'd hate to drop it and skewer Mo Ran from above. His right arm almost refused to unlock, which he chalked up to the adrenaline, but he coaxed it loose and let Mo Ran take all of his weight again.

They tumbled to the floor in a bloody heap. Chu Wanning's strength was spent, completely; the noose was as heavy as lead, and he couldn't even raise his hands to remove it. Mo Ran had to pull it loose, and finally the easing of the pressure around his neck made his ears pop and his tears fall.

“It’s all right, it’s all right, we did it, we did it, baobei,” Mo Ran said, crying above him – oh, how beautiful his face was, even like this, even in such distress…

He wanted to sob, but he still didn’t have enough air. Mo Ran used the scissors of the Leatherman to score through the duct tape beneath his ear, where there was a slight gap, and he ripped it off. It took hair with it, but Chu Wanning didn’t give a damn; he spat out the mouthful of blood from where the blade had cut his lips and his tongue, and then he drank down the air until his lungs ached and he felt oxygen drunk.

He could collapse, now, he could sleep. The world was spinning, walls turning around him like a gyroscope while he sucked down that delicious, poisonous air, and for a moment he forgot everything other than the twin joys of unrestricted breathing and Mo Ran’s arms around him.

Then Nangong Xu’s face swam into focus, kneeling beside him; Chu Wanning froze in terror.

“That. Was. Amazing,” Nangong Xu said. He was unwrapping one of the White Rabbit sweets. “Wow. Marvellous entertainment for my last night on earth. I really didn’t think you were going to pull that off. Who brings a multi-tool to a black-tie event? I’ll tell you what, I’ll never underestimate engineers again. I mean, *I* won’t get a chance to, but the rest of you guys, take note, eh?”

“We did it,” Mo Ran said above him, teeth audibly clenched. “We did it. You said you’d let us go…”

“I didn’t, actually,” Nangong Xu said, and Chu Wanning felt true despair then.

"No!"

“Besides. The whole point of this was to see if I’d have been able to save Luo Fenghua, and he didn’t have a multi-tool. So we’re going to have to do it all over again…”

“I’ll kill you!” Mo Ran shouted, and Chu Wanning felt the cold pressure of a gun barrel at his own temple. He couldn’t bring himself to care. It was cool, and he was tired…

“I just have one question for Chu Wanning,” Nangong Xu said. His expression and voice were suddenly very serious. “Do you love him back?”

Chu Wanning relaxed, and he felt perversely grateful. Nangong Xu had at least given him this before he killed him. He didn’t have the courage to say those words himself – he felt as though just speaking them would taint them, rot them by virtue of *him* being the one saying them – but a straight question… That, he could answer.

“Yes.” He smiled, and nodded as much as his swollen neck would allow. “Yes.”

Nangong Xu sighed.

“Permit me a final question. How long?”

Chu Wanning blinked; his eyes felt as though they had grit in them, despite his tears.

“Three…? Four? Four years…”

“Damn.”

Nangong Xu stood up; as though through a telescope, Chu Wanning watched him go to Nangong Si, roughly turn him around, and cut his wrists free.

“Fuck off. I’m tired now,” he announced, and the weariness in his voice was apparent. “Let them go. And my nephew. I don’t care anymore.”

“Sir,” one of his men asked. “What about Hanlin…?”

“We’ve done plenty for him tonight. If he wants to hire you himself, you can take on the job and get paid twice. You’re welcome.” He addressed another of the men. “Number One, have you picked what name you’re going to use?”

“My own.”

“Good. A good answer… Well, Yuxan, I wish you luck, and congratulations on your promotion. Thanks for everything.”

“More than welcome, boss. The others? The judge and the businessman?”

“They can burn with us. Fetch Five and Six – Four and Five now, ha – lock the doors, and put some fuel down in the corridor and on the stairs.”

“I know how to burn down a building,” the man named Yuxan said with a laugh. “You’re staying with your brother?”

“I think so. No less than what we both deserve.” Nangong Xu looked at Mo Ran. “What are you still doing here? You want to burn with us as well?”

The sudden movement was agonising. Chu Wanning could barely move, but he didn’t need to; Nangong Si was there at his side, fresh and unhurt, lifting him up easily. But being apart from Mo Ran felt like death, even as he could see Mo Ran ahead opening the door for them.

There was a final animalistic wail from behind them. Nangong Liu, trying to scream despite the paralysis, trying to plead with his sons to take him with them.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes.

Chapter 55: Smoke on the Water

The fire was catching. The room was all old woollen carpets on parquet floors, oil canvases with wooden frames, wooden wainscotting, wooden doors, wooden stairs with wooden bannisters – an arsonist's dream.

Mo Ran pulled open the heavy wooden door; the muscles of his arms and back and legs felt as though they'd been pulled to strings, every fibre snapped. He looked around for Nangong Si, who carried Chu Wanning easily.

Then, as they passed him into the cold night, he took a final look at his father and his *real* uncle. Nangong Xu lay down beside Nangong Liu's paralysed body, curled on his side and facing him, as though they were boys again under a shared cover, whispering in the darkness.

Mo Ran was glad he'd already thrown up an hour before, back when he was an innocent, wide-eyed child, who'd thought the worst thing that could possibly happen that night was realising who his fucking father was.

The night sky was lit up in rhythmic flashes of blue and red, cut through with sirens both near and far. The College was laid out like an old palace, all courtyards – no, worse than that, with the passages single doors under narrow archways.

"This place is like a fucking maze," he said through gritted teeth.

They hurried under a lamp, and Mo Ran looked back at Chu Wanning. There was blood at his hairline, with red marks on his temples and left cheekbone that would clearly become bruises. His chin was covered in blood, from the initial split of his lip and from the cut through the gag, but Mo Ran now saw he had a nose bleed as well.

What he hadn't been able to see before, what made his hands shake, was a strange rash across Chu Wanning's forehead, clustered around his eyes, a galaxy of tiny red pinpricks.

And then there was the rope-burn, an angry abrasion, the skin raw, scratched open, welling with fresh blood.

"Put me d… 'M fine, A-Si, I can walk, put me down…"

Nangong Si ignored him and answered Mo Ran instead. "This one goes through to the Main Quad – to the right, just- oof!"

The world turned horizontal, and Mo Ran felt all of the air knocked out of his lungs; one second, he was slipping on the polished stones of the walkway, and the next, his cheek was squashed into the cold mud and wet grass of the lawn. One clawed hand pressed his face into the ground; a knee dug into the small of his back as his hands were yanked behind his back and his wrists enclosed in tight steel.

"No!" he shouted, struggling against the two men on him. "He said we could go, he said he was letting us go!"

Nangong Si lay next to him, not struggling at all.

Neither was Chu Wanning. Two men were on him as well, wearing black bulletproof vests and helmet-mounted torches, handcuffing his hands behind his back.

He wasn't moving.

Suddenly, Mo Ran wanted to cry. "I'll fucking kill you!" he roared instead. "Get the *fuck* off me!"

"It's all right, Mo Ran. They're police-"

He saw it then: a patch on one of the men's arms, navy blue, with a yellow representation of the Great Wall and five stars above it. Special police.

“This is standard procedure,” Nangong Si was saying, as calmly as though they were sharing coffee and a cigarette, not face down on wet grass. “They have to check we’re not disguised as hostages to escape.”

“Wanning’s not moving!” Mo Ran snarled in reply. “You, help him! You need to help him!”

“Be quiet!”

“My name is Nangong Si. I’m an Officer with the Blue Sword Commando Unit, Beijing 42987. We’re co-operating, we’re calm, but he’s right, that man needs urgent medical attention.”

This caught their attention. A man somewhere behind Mo Ran gave an order for them to turn Chu Wanning over, and Mo Ran watched his head loll to the side.

“Stay calm. Mo Ran. Stay calm,” Nangong Si was saying, and all of the loathing Mo Ran used to feel for him rushed back in like a tsunami.

“Fuck you! Get off me, you sack of shit – get off!”

One of the police officers was pulling down Chu Wanning’s eyelids. He patted his bruised cheek, not lightly, and Mo Ran blacked out with rage.

“He was hanged,” Nangong Si was saying. “A few seconds, but with the full bodyweight on the neck, suspended. If his throat’s swelling- We’ll tell you everything, we can tell you numbers, weaponry, but he needs an ambulance, trauma protocol, right now.”

“He has a heart condition,” Mo Ran said. Struggling against the two heavy men on him was futile; his chest was compressed, his breathing more and more painful. “His heart – he needs-”

He squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel himself sinking into panic, and he felt helpless, fourteen years old again. In the wake of helplessness he could sense despair, hanging like poisonous smoke above him.

"He needs a police escort," Nangong Si was saying, and Mo Ran opened his eyes just to stare at him in hatred. A police escort, to the hospital. *Sure*. Chu Wanning cut himself out of his own bonds, and within minutes he was cuffed by the police instead.

He wanted to kill them. Nangong Si, Nangong Liu, Nangong Xu, and every fucking police officer in the world. He wanted to kill all the hostages too, who had escaped into the night without a second thought. And then he'd go out into Linyi, and murder everyone who walked past a freezing, begging child, everyone who watched CCTV and had sucked their teeth at what a terrible, ruthless traitor that Chu Wanning had turned out to be, everyone eating and gossiping and paying their fucking taxes. He wanted to kill his aunt and uncle, obliviously watching their darling son in some fucking robotics competition in California, as though their supposed best friend wasn't bleeding from his nose, being hauled up his injured, handcuffed arm by two walking corpses who were probably going to put him in a cell instead of the back of an ambulance.

Then he wanted to lie down with Chu Wanning in his arms, and light a fire.

He could feel the heat of it now, and hear the roar. It was what no one expected, how *loud* a fire was.

"Let me go with him," he said, offering the motherfuckers one last opportunity to be granted mercy.

"You stay there. Officer Nangong, sit up, where's your badge?"

"Front breast pocket, left side," Nangong Si said, as his captors helped him into a sitting position. "There are still three hostages inside, dead or dying, definitely incapacitated. At least ten suspects, all dressed as waiters in blue waistcoats with matching face-masks, armed with semi-automatic weapons. Mostly AR-15s, but I saw at least two QSZ-92s, and they

know corrupt officers, so they'll be aware of your tactics. They have a signal jammer. Fire accelerant used on both storeys."

One of the men holding Mo Ran was still digging his knee into the small of his back. Two of the police were carrying Chu Wanning out, radioing for medical assistance; one was hoisting him up by his shoulder, and Mo Ran pressed his face into the soil until he couldn't breathe for it, upside down in a cold grave.

"They're on the roof!" someone said above him, and Mo Ran found himself hoping that the waiters would just open fire on them right now.

The air was loud with sirens – police, fire engines, ambulances, perhaps. From a hundred miles away, Nangong Si's voice echoed.

"Mo Ran? You can sit up, as long as you don't struggle, okay? The fire's spreading and they need to move us back."

"Fuck your mother," Mo Ran replied. Chu Wanning wasn't there to tell him off now.

"This is procedure, they have to do this. I've worked hostage situations too, and we do the exact same thing."

"Fuck you too, then."

"Sometimes the hostage-takers disguise themselves as hostages to escape," he continued in that same calm, understanding voice, and if Mo Ran's hands were free he'd have wrapped them around Nangong Si's neck.

He was hauled to his feet, and one of the officers hurried him through to the big oak gates at the front of the College; another guided Nangong Si far more gently.

Mo Ran noticed that *his* handcuffs had been removed.

Gathered in the vast stone doorway were some more of the hostages, surrounded by more police. These ones looked more normal, general Linyi People's Police. None of *these* hostages were handcuffed either; they were clamouring, but instead of asking to leave they were trying to give their own statement first or demanding medical attention.

"To those of you who have just started tuned into this livestream, I'm *literally* in the Rufeng Hostage-College right now. You can see we're so close to the fire-"

"I am the CPPCC Chairman for the whole of Shandong, and I am *commanding you*-"

"I'll tell you all about what it was like but I'm just so traumatised, I can't even speak, but I have to help my followers see this – look, the fire's so high now, the fire engines are going around the back-"

"He shot him. Dong Kang. He's the Emeritus Professor of Physics. And he just. He just shot him, right in the head. He shot him in the head."

Mo Ran had been left to sit on some steps as the police tried to answer questions and keep the other hostages contained. In his pocket, his phone was buzzing incessantly. He bent over, head between his knees.

Where was Chu Wanning? In an ambulance? In a police car? Dead under a sheet?

He'd thought that he'd be able to help, if he came to Linyi. Instead he'd lost everything.

He saw Nangong Si in animated conversation with one of the police officers. Both of them kept looking towards him, and then began to walk over.

“He volunteered to stay behind. He helped everyone else get to safety. He’ll be calm – Mo Ran, be calm, okay?”

“Okay,” he replied, voice flat. What did it matter anymore?

“Okay.”

His handcuffs were unlocked, and the police officer left them. Nangong Si took a seat on the steps next to him; the fire two courtyards away glittered in his eyes.

“Chu Wanning arrived at the hospital. They gave him something for his heart, and he’s conscious. They’re doing some scans to rule out any hairline fractures in his neck.”

Mo Ran looked away. “How nice of them to tell you all that. I see being a *Blue Sword Commando* has its advantages. Are you chummy enough to stop them from arresting him?”

“Why would they arrest him?”

Mo Ran couldn’t help it; he barked in mirthless laughter. “Because they can! Because he makes them look bad. Because he’s been talking about police corruption for years, and so now they all hate him. They send him death threats. As soon as he got back to Sichuan they arrested him and interrogated him for two days just because *they* hadn’t been able to solve who sent us the bomb. And now he’s one of the survivors of this clusterfuck, with all those important people shouting about what an arrogant asshole he is? Wise up.”

“That was in Sichuan, not here.”

“*Here* was where those two bastards threatened him when he was… Whatever. You’ve given him to them now.”

Nangong Si looked at him for a long moment, before he got up and walked away, taking out his phone.

It reminded Mo Ran to look at his own.

Hi Dog, we just woke up for breakfast – FINALS DAY! Longcheng is ready to go, we're going to ***dominate*** *those UAE bastards. Their team is fucking ridiculous, there's like ten of them. Did you know they're being sponsored? This is literally meant to be amateurs only ffs. I SHOULD HAVE GOT SPONSORSHIP. But then Chu-laoshi wouldn't like that.*

Pick up the phone!

Mo Ran why is Chu-laoshi trending on Weibo?

PICK UP

WHAT IS HAPPENING

WHAT IS HAPPENING PICK UP THE PHONE

WHY AREN'T YOU ANSWERING

Ge there's videos all over Douyin are you in there???? Chu-laoshi's in them are you with him???

PICK UP THE FUCKING PHONE!!!!

Mo Ran couldn't bear the thought of speaking to Xue Meng right now. Especially because soon he'd find out… He texted instead.

We're okay. We're safe. Still in Rufeng, they're putting the fire out. Chu Wanning's gone to the hospital but he was conscious last I heard.

Then, with a surge of malice, he sent another:

Good luck in the finals today.

He put his phone back in his pocket and rubbed his stinging eyes. The smoke was making them water.

Nangong Si came back to their step. "I phoned Ye Wangxi," he said as he sat. "She's a few minutes from the hospital. She won't leave his side; she'll make sure nothing happens to him."

"Ye Wangxi… oh. Your *cop friend*."

"No anymore. Not a cop, anymore I mean. Still my… still my friend."

Nangong Si's hesitance and faraway look made Mo Ran stop. "Did something…?"

"No, no, she left voluntarily. Best shooter in the unit and threw it all in. A few months ago some total fucking asshole had the audacity to give her shit about 'abuse of power' and the 'road of corruption' and whatever and she took it to heart," Nangong Si said with a sidelong glance. "I told her that the bloke was a total idiot, didn't have two brain cells to rub together, but once she sets her mind to something, she's as stubborn as a Zheng man buying shoes, and she cares about her integrity."

"Who does that remind us of?" Mo Ran said, using the plural as a peace-offering. He sighed and rubbed his eyes again. Damn smoke… He should text Xue Meng again, he thought, and took out his phone. "Well, I'm glad. She seemed decent, and all cops are bastards."

“Takes one to know one,” Nangong Si said, and blanched when Mo Ran snorted. “Not because- I meant because you’re a dickhead, not because-”

“Wow, gege, this shit already?” Mon Ran said. He finally smiled; Nangong Si looked so mortified. “I think tonight you get a pass. I mean, we’re literally…”

Watching your father burn to death, was the end of that sentence, and the smirk slid off his face.

Nangong Si seemed to have heard it anyway. He looked back towards the flames.

“You okay?” Mo Ran finally asked. He slightly regretted that ‘Fuck your mother’ comment now.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Sure. Me too,” Mo Ran said.

A muscle worked in Nangong Si’s jaw. “He deserved it.”

Mo Ran shrugged. “Maybe. He was still your dad, though.”

Nangong Si swallowed painfully, and gave him a nod of gratitude. “It doesn’t feel like I’m losing him tonight. I feel like… I lost him months ago, once I stopped trying to doubt Chu Wanning and started finding evidence, and I’ve already been grieving the man I knew. The man who raised me. And this is… another man, with his face. I’ll probably have to stop compartmentalising at some point, but… not tonight.”

“Not tonight,” Mo Ran agreed. He looked over at the police officers; more and more kept arriving. “When can we go?”

“It’ll be a while. They’ll want to take statements. Listen, um, before I stick my foot in my mouth… Um. Chu Wanning. Are you and he… involved?”

Mo Ran gave him a flat stare. “No.”

“It wouldn’t matter to me if you were. I always thought that Chu Wanning wasn’t interested in anyone, or if he was, it definitely wasn’t women. My father said that he was gay. He asked me once whether he’d ever touched me or tried to kiss me or anything…” Mo Ran’s fury must have shown on his face, because Nangong Si looked embarrassed. “Yeah. Fuck. How was I so blind?”

“He was your dad,” Mo Ran said with a shrug. “Why would he want to be making shit up about some kid?”

“I could always tell he didn’t like him. But by then I hated him too. I felt like my mother died and he just… abandoned me. And Dad said the same thing. That he was ambitious, and that we weren’t of use to him anymore.”

“'Of use'... He's never used anyone in his life. No, wait, he makes us... Used to make us all clean the lab together, at the beginning of the semester. I always said he was using us for free labour. He... he hates cleaning. Shit at it too. But apart from that...” The smoke made his throat close up. It was just *so unfair*. How were reality and perception so different to each other?

Nangong Si was on his phone. “There’s… volumes of it. Thousands of pages of evidence. They’re going to be combing through this for weeks – police and public… Oh, speaking of which, they want your phone. The video you filmed.”

“Right.”

He uploaded it to Weibo.

Sorry, he then texted Xue Meng*, my head's all over the place. We really are both okay though, so keep your head up and show them who's boss, yeah? You've worked for months on this and Chu-laoshi would die if-*

He backspaced.

Chu-laoshi would be so pissed off if he thought he'd jeopardised your entry. Win it for him, yeah?

They're going to take my phone for some evidence or whatever bullshit, but Chu-laoshi's got his, so send us updates there, and we can check when we've finished all the statements and shit. Load of posh knobs involved so it'll be all over social media but might not be on the news yet, don't watch it until after the competition because they don't know shit, I'll tell you the whole story later.

Say hi to Auntie and Uncle for me.

Fucking smoke.

Chapter 56: Concerning Magnets

Chapter Notes

> Content warning: Meltdown resulting in involuntary injection with haloperidol in a medical setting.

It was the pain in his shoulder that woke him. Chu Wanning's feet skimmed across the ground, like he was a stone tossed across a lake. He was held up between two men, and he ineffectually tried to struggle.

He closed his eyes against the brightness ahead, cut through with flashing blue, and then he was being lifted up somewhere.

"What the hell are you doing?! Carrying him like that – you should have asked for a stretcher! Here, here, help me get him on the bed – what happened?"

"Hanged, apparently."

"Hanged! You call yourself police – you're as good as the terrorists in there. You can follow behind, we need room to work," the woman snapped, and Chu Wanning risked blinking against the light for a second. The sirens were already like skewers in his ears, and the lights was like needles in his eyes, but he was rewarded with knowledge: she wore the white and red coat of an ambulance medic, DOCTOR emblazoned across her chest.

He was able to relax just a little, then. He might not trust doctors a great deal, but he trusted them a thousand times more than police.

His trust was immediately betrayed when something closed around his neck, and pure panic flooded his system. "No!" he croaked, trying to push her away with his good hand.

"*Xu, xu, xu*, you're all right," she said. "You can breathe, I promise – it's not tight. It's a brace to protect your neck, not hurt it-"

"*No!*"

"He's stronger than he looks; Doctor, should I get the Midazolam?" asked a man in the same jacket, who was pressing Chu Wanning down against the bed.

His skin had been removed, his final flimsy defence against the world; every nerve was open to the air, he could feel all existence like electricity, and it *hated* him.

"Midazolam, for a hanging victim? When did you graduate, lunchtime? Benzos can exacerbate respiratory distress, and we're already getting stridor from him. Haloperidol, IM 500 micrograms. Calm down, sir, *please*, calm down, we're trying to help you."

He wanted to. Some part of him, the stoic, cold, robotic part – it felt vaguely embarrassed by his performance. But Mo Ran was gone, and there was something around his neck, and his reality had constricted to those two facts.

The male medic rolled him onto his side, and there was a sudden sharp pain in his left buttock.

It was unexpected enough to shock him out of his panic. He was rolled back onto his back, and something was strapped across his chest.

He froze. "Don't-"

"It's all right. It's just to stop you from falling off if we go around any bends," said the woman. "Look, your hands are free. Okay? Hands are free. We just gave you a little injection to help you to calm down, so that we can all focus together on your breathing. Then when we get to the hospital, you're going to have a couple of scans, just to check that the little bones in your neck aren't broken. Are you allergic to anything?"

Chu Wanning tried to shake his head, and the feeling of panic resurfaced. "N-no."

“Any metal in your body? Like a pin or something?”

“Back,” he said. “I had a… scapulectomy.”

“That’s great. That helps us to tell the doctors what kind of scan would be best. You’re doing very well. We’re going to give you an IV drip with some anti-inflammatories and painkillers, your neck will feel so much better in just a few minutes…”

The swiftness of the ambulance had been making him feel nauseated, and the screaming sirens had pounded against his temples. But the nausea faded away, and the screaming became something fuzzy and bearable. Even the pain in his neck was subsiding, and it felt easier to draw a full breath again.

The doctor seemed reluctant to move him too much, so she cut up his right sleeve of his dinner jacket with some medical scissors. She undid his cufflink. “I’ll keep this safe for you,” she said, and the little rubellite plum blossom glittered in the bright lights. *Honing gives the sword its edge; bitter cold gives the plum blossom its fragrance.* He thought that he could live with a little less fragrance, perhaps, as he saw the raw manacle of torn skin around his wrist.

But the liquid in the IV bag was cold, and he felt it creeping up his arm with delicious coolness, as though his cells were blossoming with it as it entered his bloodstream. Cold adding fragrance to little red flowers…

It was more like the poem of Su Shi, he thought. *Lustrous-bright were the plum blossoms amid the weeds and brambles, but last night the east wind blew stones asunder*.

“Stones cracking?” she said, and Chu Wanning tried to shake his head in apology. “No, no, don’t move it – try to keep still.”

But the absence of Mo Ran… the haloperidol did nothing for that.

*

Chu Wanning slept on and off through the scans – X-ray, CT, and then an MRI, once they'd confirmed the pins in his shoulder were titanium. They were testing for something called a hangman's fracture – fitting – of the C2 bone, and for hyoid and thyroid fractures. Otherwise, their main concern was keeping his body on as many anti-inflammatories as possible, to prevent his throat from swelling and closing up.

He noticed more and more police kept arriving, hiding him from view, escorting him to one machine and then the other.

He came to when they were back in a private room, waiting for the scan results, and finally, there was one he recognised: Nangong Si's friend from Beijing. She was wearing civilian clothes though, and a sports hairband to bring her awkward length of hair back from her face, showing her strong, dark brows.

He tried to remember her name. "Officer Ye?"

She smiled at him. "Ye Wangxi. I'm not in the police anymore. A-Si asked me to come here and look after you."

Chu Wanning swallowed – a herculean effort. "Where is he? Where's…?"

"On their way. It's about five in the morning. They were just let go; they had to give statements. They're coming here with Superintendent Chen; he's heading up the investigation into what happened."

Chu Wanning tried and failed to nod. "Are they under arrest? Am I?"

“No. You were the victims, Dr. Chu.”

He managed a mirthless smile at that. “Mm. Could I trouble you for water?”

“I’m sorry, not yet. They might have to operate. But they said that if there aren’t any fractures you can be discharged today. The fuzziness is mostly the haloperidol they gave you in the ambulance, and the painkillers.”

Chu Wanning grimaced, mortified by the memory. “They put something around my neck, and I… I know it was a neck brace, so I couldn’t move it. But it… it doesn’t matter.”

“I understand,” Ye Wangxi said, simply and sincerely.

“I should apologise, to the doctor in the ambulance.”

“They’ll understand as well. It’s, um… To say ‘It’s all over the news’ doesn’t really come close. That’s why there’s so many police around. To guard you from anyone, not to guard them from you.”

“Anyone?”

“I mean… Nangong Xu released gigabytes of evidence. There’s… Um. There’s even a sex tape, with his brother and Qi Liangji. The woman you told A-Si about. They discuss killing their spouses in it, to be together.”

Heavens. Chu Wanning felt vaguely discomforted by a woman he didn't know saying such a thing to him.

“Obviously they try to take it down immediately, but he was clearly preparing for this for a long time. He made an army of bots to keep releasing it, and they’re posting everything faster than they can be shut down. And he implicates just… so many people. Police, politicians,

lawyers, judges, businessmen. They're already talking about a purge of the Shanghai Municipal Committee. Guyueye's stocks are in the toilet, and the National Health Commission was already in trouble over the pandemic, so this is just…" Ye Wangxi looked at him. "At the moment, the only person in China with a better reputation than yesterday is…"

Chu Wanning groaned.

"Yeah. One of the videos has already been shared three million times. The one of you arguing that the other hostages should be released. Um. Dr Chu?"

Chu Wanning realised that he was kneading his fluttering heart. "Mn? Yes, sorry."

"Before the others get here, I wanted to apologise."

The sudden change of direction confused him; Ye Wangxi had been perfectly polite. "For what?"

"For Ya'an. What we did to you was… unconscionable."

What new danger was about to be revealed? The woman next to him was so earnest, her guilt writ so clearly on her face, that it sent a shard of ice through Chu Wanning's heart.

"What…" he said. "What did you do?"

She blinked in visible bemusement. "We… You were ill. You were so ill, and we barged in and A-Si questioned you. And I let him."

The fear gained strength. What had they done to him, that he couldn't remember? "But you didn't… You didn't arrest me, or hurt me. I don't think. I don't quite… I wasn't very well."

“No. I know, Dr Chu.” It was Ye Wangxi’s turn to look confused. “We should never have disturbed you when you were meant to be recovering. However upset A-Si was by the letter, we should never have gone to Sichuan so soon after the explosion. He should never have been so rude to your student, and I should never have let him.” She looked down at her folded hands. “Mo Ran had the right of it. I’ve been shouted at by more sergeants than I can remember, but what he said… I put my loyalty before my integrity. I resigned from Blue Sword as soon as I returned to Beijing, but I ought to have sought you out and personally apologised before now.”

For that? That was what she had struggled with for nine months, what she had left the police over?

The ice melted into pain.

“It’s quite all right,” he said, as kindly as he could with his aching throat. “I appreciate you saying so. I can’t articulate how much.”

“I shouldn’t have to.”

“Very few would. Please, Officer… Ms. Ye. Please don’t give it a second thought.” He tried to smile. “I wish I could say that it was a pleasure to meet you under better circumstances, but…”

Ye Wangxi cracked a smile at that. “He said you were funny,” she said fondly, and stood up. “Let me try to chase down a doctor for you.”

It became obvious that her efficiency had carried over into civilian life. Within minutes, a doctor was telling him that there were no fractures showing up – clearly Nangong Xu had indicated that he be pulled up gently, to make it last longer.

It was hard to work out. On the one hand, he had been the one to devise such a sadistic game, but on the other, he had made it possible for Chu Wanning to survive it.

“We can discharge you soon, but you *need* to be completely supervised for at least 48 hours,” the doctor was saying. “That’s because sometimes the throat can swell up and restrict the breathing, and then you’ll need someone to call an ambulance for you. But we’ll give you plenty of anti-inflammatories and painkillers, so please make sure you stay on top of them.” He glanced between Chu Wanning and Ye Wangxi. “We, er… We’ve been asked to request that you stay here until the police can have a word with you. But you can drink now – liquids only for a couple of days, all right?”

Chu Wanning didn’t need to be told that; even sipping water was painful. He was just about to ask whether he was going to need to give a statement that day when Mo Ran and Nangong Si arrived.

A tiny part of his brain registered suddenly that they were all still wearing black tie. How ridiculous it was. How ridiculous they were.

But the rest, oh, all the rest was taken up by Mo Ran’s face. Pain vanished like hoar frost under the sun.

There was mud on his face and ash in his hair, and he was the most beautiful thing Chu Wanning had ever seen.

Neither said a word, as Nangong Si stepped aside to allow entry to a man in a police uniform, but the vice around Chu Wanning’s lungs eased a little, and Mo Ran’s shoulders lowered just as much.

Superintendent Chen Yusheng was apparently going to hear his statement himself, though he’d brought in a lackey to actually write it up.

“We’ll get started,” he said to the other three. “If you wouldn’t mind giving us some privacy?”

“I would like for them to stay,” said Chu Wanning.

“I’m afraid statements have to be taken individually. To cut down the chances of collaboration.”

“I’m afraid that since my teenage encounter with your colleagues – not *your* colleagues, I’m sure – I mean Li Jiahoa and Chen Mingtao… I prefer not to speak to police alone if I can help it.”

Chen Yusheng visibly clenched his teeth, but couldn’t argue with that. “The conversation is being recorded. Please, Dr Chu, you can trust us.”

“Of course. Perhaps Ms. Ye would stay instead? She wasn’t present in the College, and was until recently in the Blue Sword Commando Unit.” Chu Wanning tried to smile, but his face was swelling. “Then if I’m thirsty or require a nurse…”

His eyes flickered to Ye Wangxi to apologise for his sexism; she replied with an infinitesimal quirk of the corner of her mouth.

This was deemed acceptable, though Mo Ran and Nangong Si left with visible reluctance.

The statement took over two hours, spanning nearly fifteen years as it did, and eventually Chu Wanning really did have to rely on Ye Wangxi for some tea and an increase in painkillers.

“But why would you bring your student to something like this?” Chen Yusheng asked. “Not a wife or a girlfriend?”

It was becoming more and more difficult to speak, but Chu Wanning tried to muster a laugh at that. “If you thought that there was a possibility that you were walking into a trap, Superintendent, would *you* take your wife? Or would you take a colleague who’s 190 cm tall? Besides, he was the student who was in the explosion in February. He wanted to see it through.”

“Did you know about any… ulterior motive for wanting to attend?”

Chu Wanning was very aware of his heart monitor, and very aware as well that he didn’t want to contradict anything Mo Ran had said or not said about Nangong Liu. “No, I don’t know if he had one. He told me that he wanted answers as much as I did, and I believed him.”

“Don’t you think that you behaved rather naively? Walking into an obvious trap, not questioning why someone else might want to join you?”

“Hm.” Chu Wanning thought about his answer. “You’ll know of course that I have Self-Enclosure Disorder. One of the symptoms is that I have a tendency to take things at face value. I can give you a very accurate recounting of what happened and what was said, but with regards to insight into others’ motives… I would not be confident of any answers I could give. I can only give you the facts, I’m afraid.”

“But you can give us an insight into your own motives.”

“Yes, of course. I was worried about Nangong Si. If he had asked for me and for my help and I had not given it, I would have had a regret on my conscience. It was a simple decision.”

Chen Yusheng looked doubtful at that, but he left it. It was another half hour before he finally stopped questioning Chu Wanning, by which time he only wanted to see Mo Ran and then sleep for a week.

“They said I could be discharged when you were happy,” he forced out, syllable by syllable. “We’ve got two rooms in, um… The Hyatt.”

Chen Yusheng shook his head. “It’s already surrounded by press. Where were you planning on going next? Chengdu?”

“Not immediately. The train goes from Shanghai anyway, and I think I have to go to my doctors there. My shoulder doesn’t feel… as it should.” It was also a convenient place to

meet the Xues as soon as possible.

“The background of the case is moving there as well. But I’m concerned. This is… huge. It’s going to be the only thing on the news all month, I reckon."

“Nangong Si will be able to recommend a good hotel,” Ye Wangxi said. “And you can drive, rather than take the train.”

“Ah, I’m not allowed to hire a car,” Chu Wanning said. “Exit ban. Besides, my arm is…” He indicated the new sling.

Chen Yusheng and Ye Wangxi were the ones to share a look then, and Chu Wanning felt a little betrayed.

“Dr Chu,” she said. “We’ll drive you.”

“It’s a seven hour drive.”

“Or, you know… Nangong Liu had a plane.”

Chu Wanning glared. “I think not.”

“What an excellent Communist,” Chen Yusheng said. “But in the interests of safety-”

“Mo Ran is a good driver. If you write permission for us to leave, I can hire a car for us, or he can.”

Ye Wangxi smiled. “We’ll drive you.”

Chu Wanning gave up. “Tomorrow. I need to sleep. I need to…” He had barely seen Mo Ran since he was being hanged (what a sentence to think). It was necessary, he knew – he wanted Mo Ran to receive as little attention as possible. He wanted to shield him from the cruel gaze of the world. Let Chu Wanning take the repudiation, the scorn, the suspicion. As long as Mo Ran was safe…

Safe, he thought, with a creeping chill of guilt. What a joke.

Perhaps Mo Ran thought that too. He barely looked at him as Nangong Si wheeled Chu Wanning out of the hospital, clutching the remnants of his dinner jacket, his plum blossom cufflinks, and a huge bag of pills. As soon as they stepped into the ambulance bay, where two police cars were waiting for them, his phone began to ring and notifications started to fly across the screen.

“It’s Xue Meng,” Mo Ran said, his first words to him since their reunion. “I’ll text him back, if you want.”

Chu Wanning nodded and handed it over. “The code’s-”

“Same as the lockbox? I remember it.”

“Mn.” He didn’t miss Nangong Si’s glance at them in the rearview mirror.

They arrived by the staff entrance; as Chen Yusheng had said, the front was swarming with journalists. Nangong Si booked two rooms in the same hotel, saying he’d prefer to be close by in case of trouble.

Chu Wanning could walk, but it was slow and unsteady. Mo Ran moved in a similar fashion, as though he had cramp in every limb at once. He supposed that they’d over-exerted themselves dramatically during the hanging, and with the adrenaline gone, they’d be feeling the effects for a few days.

“Do you want me to come in and talk?” Nangong Si asked, and Chu Wanning gave him a weary smile.

“I’m good for nothing. The only thing I want to do is sleep.”

“Sure. Let’s meet up tonight, eat something. We’ll monitor what’s going on…”

“Make sure to get some rest as well.” Mo Ran was ignoring all the politeness; he’d entered his room, and Chu Wanning heard the deadbolt being drawn with a feeling of dread.

“We’re just at the end of this corridor. There’s going to be a policeman by the lift and another by the fire exit, purely for protection, until we have more of an idea…”

“Mn. I know. See you tonight.”

They went down the corridor, and the police escort waited while Chu Wanning fumbled with his card-key.

“Thank you,” he said, when he finally stepped inside. “See you later.”

He followed Mo Ran’s implicit advice and set both the dead-bolt and the chain on. He pressed his head to the wood of the door, feeling the swelling tenderness of his face more and more.

He ought to go next door and apologise to Mo Ran. Thank him for saving his life. Ask him what he’d meant, about the implication that Nangong Liu was his… But his soul had nearly been torn from his body a few hours before, and he held the tatters of it in his aching throat.

And he'd provoked Nangong Xu, not entirely rationally; he could try to explain, but at the end of the day, they both knew that Chu Wanning was, quite simply, insufferable. His obnoxiousness had further traumatised Mo Ran, and Chu Wanning was to blame.

Mo Ran had said it was a trap, and Chu Wanning had walked into it anyway. He'd taken Mo Ran's support for granted, when he didn't deserve it in the first place. And then, just like after the night his drink was spiked, Mo Ran had saved his life *again*.

No. Even if Mo Ran just wanted to crawl into bed, he needed to apologise.

Or was that egocentric too? His own selfish desire for reassurance and forgiveness winning out as a priority over Mo Ran's comfort…

He turned around, and almost jumped out of his skin; he heard his own wheeze of surprise.

Mo Ran was waiting beside their adjoining door. His face was dark.

He would later think of them as a pair of magnets. Chu Wanning had used to repulse Mo Ran. They had been two identical poles, both stubborn, both temperamental, both insecure and overthinking and messed up, and then for some reason Mo Ran had turned around, and now they had no choice but to come together, attracted irresistibly.

"Mo Ran," Chu Wanning began, but then there was pain: the pain of Mo Ran's lips pressed vehemently against his split ones, the pain of his tongue pressed down by Mo Ran's, the pain of their noses smashed together and the furious hand pressing against the knot on the back of his head.

It was exquisite.

He kissed back as well as he could, but his lips and tongue hurt, and Mo Ran barely seemed to notice his reciprocation. Instead, Chu Wanning was swept away in the flood of it, Mo Ran manhandling him to the bed and shoving his down with far more force than his body frankly

wanted at that point. A white button from his dress shirt pinged against a wall, and Mo Ran's fingers scrabbled at his waistband.

"Where the *fuck* is the button?" Mo Ran growled, not sounding like Mo Ran at all. His voice was deeper, and Chu Wanning felt as though his spinal cord was the first string of a qin, thrumming with the low vibrations of it.

"Cummerbund," he managed to gasp, his own voice disgusting, wheezing and high in comparison, but before he could drop into familiar self-loathing Mo Ran lifted him off the bed as though he really did weigh nothing.

The buckle defeated him, so he pulled it up Chu Wanning's torso, up under his sling. It made Chu Wanning realise that he was meant to be undoing Mo Ran's fly in response; he'd never done it before to another man, obviously, and the mirroring of the usual gesture evaded him. Heavy heat was pooling at the base of his spine, and all the weight of his blood seemed to have sunk downwards, leaving his hands shaking and weak, like hydraulic pistons without any fluid in them.

Mo Ran growled in frustration and batted Chu Wanning's hand to the side, kissing him roughly again as he unbuttoned and unzipped himself. Then he took Chu Wanning's wrist and pressed his hand to his hard, hot skin.

For a second, Chu Wanning thought it was Mo Ran's thigh. Then realisation dawned with a strange kind of excited horror. But he barely had time to comprehend the *size* of the thing before Mo Ran's wet mouth was on his neck, on the raw line of the white rope, and his hand was wrapped around Chu Wanning's own penis.

Chu Wanning had never much seen the appeal of it. His own experimental teenage fumblings had felt lacklustre and vaguely disgusting. But this was something entirely different, this was an undeniable exothermic reaction – the sensation of *touch* leapt up his spine like electricity and spread across his skin like heat. He thrust into Mo Ran's hand, back arching up; nothing in the world mattered except being as close to Mo Ran as possible. Everywhere their skin wasn't touching was in agony.

He hadn't known need like this could exist. He kissed the only place his split lips could reach, the hair above Mo Ran's ear. Still trapped in its sling, his left hand scrabbled uselessly

at Mo Ran's buttons; he wanted *more*, more touch, more heat, more movement across the skin of his aching penis.

He barely knew what his own right hand was doing, a Biblical almsgiving – only touch, only movement, only the wetness that smeared across his palm.

Mo Ran's hand was much, *much* more skilled; even in his frenzy and his hunger, he twisted it in a way that drove Chu Wanning insane, filling his head with vague mechanical drawings and his eyes with tears. He felt something building inside of him, a pulsating, throbbing wave; he imagined a nebula coalescing into a protostar and choked back a sob.

"Please, Mo Ran, *please*," he said, barely knowing what he was asking for.

"Don't leave me," Mo Ran snarled in his ear. "Never *fucking* leave me!"

"Never," he promised, and Mo Ran moved his fist in a way that made him blind. "Ah!"

"*Never*."

Mo Ran's whole body tensed, and for the briefest moment, Chu Wanning felt the sensation of something scalding and wet spurting over his hand and up his arm, and then his own wave crashed with unbearable pleasure and his body shone, every muscle tight, every bone soft.

Chapter 57: The Anxious Need in Me

Chapter Notes

I don't know about you guys, but I thought they needed a bit of a breather!

Mo Ran was a fucking monster.

He'd had a *plan*. He was going to make an amazing meal, from scratch, all Jiangnan dishes that Chu Wanning liked the most. His favourite crab and pork meatballs, sweet and sour squirrel fish, rice cooked in tea, followed by tanguan and lotus crisps. A bottle of Pear Blossom Baijiu – just the one. Candles (Unscented. Maybe those little battery tealights, actually, thinking about it). Rose petals on the bed, that looked classy.

And then a marathon of lovemaking, Mo-*laoshi* teaching Chu Wanning exactly how good he could make him feel. See the blush of pleasure across his jade-white face, kiss the mole behind his ear, stroke his silky hair and kiss every inch of his beautiful body…

Instead, he'd molested Chu Wanning the second they were alone, desperate and full of grief and terror, and he'd barely lasted two minutes. He had a stray steri-strip stuck to his lip, for fuck's sake.

He'd never felt post-orgasm clarity this brutal before. He rolled off Chu Wanning, and remembered that he'd *sucked his neck* – the corner of one of the dressings had peeled off – the neck that was marked with a laceration from-

Chu Wanning was lying on the bed, eyelashes fluttering. "That was…" He opened his eyes and gave Mo Ran a smile, a soft, luminous smile.

He'd come too, Mo Ran knew. What had left Mo Ran dejected with guilt had left Chu Wanning sleepy and open. But the orgasm had made the blood show in his face – a blush, but the rash of pinpricks across his forehead and around his eyes had darkened as well.

His expression must have changed, because Chu Wanning pushed himself up. “Mo Ran?”

Mo Ran grinned and ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry…”

“Sorry?” Chu Wanning looked down at himself in a daze and blinked. “Why are you… Why are you sorry?”

“No, I'm not- Not *sorry*. I mean. Yes, but-”

“Was it… bad?” he asked in a small voice.

“No!” Mo Ran said, plastering a smile on his face. “No, baobei, it was great!”

Of all times for Chu Wanning to suddenly be able to see through a lie, this was the absolute worst time, bar none.

For a second a look of total devastation flashed across his face, followed by his walls slamming up; he turned away, twisting his head to ensure his face was completely hidden, and tucked himself back into his trousers with a shaking hand.

“Wanning-”

“Whatever,” he said, and his voice was thick. Possibly with tears. Possibly because of his swollen throat.

“No, no-” Mo Ran grabbed his wrist, and Chu Wanning hissed in pain and shook him off. “Sorry, sorry, I forgot-”

“I’m tired.”

“Listen, please listen to me. Thirty seconds,” he begged, and Chu Wanning stopped, even if he resolutely refused to make eye contact and stared blankly at the floor instead. “You really were… It wasn’t that it was bad. *I* was bad.”

Chu Wanning continued to stare at the carpet. “Sure.”

“No! Genuinely, I’m- I’m *embarrassed*-”

“Mo Ran, I am not a complete idiot. I have heard you boast often and at great and vulgar length to Xue Meng about your… prowess,” Chu Wanning said with an acid that Mo Ran hadn’t heard directed at him in a long time.

“Exactly! Yes! That’s exactly what I mean. Normally I can- You know. Last. A lot longer. Normally I’m better at it.”

“With an appropriate partner. With someone who-” Chu Wanning firmly pressed his lips together, which must have hurt them, but Mo Ran could still see his chin trembling.

“No. No, no, baobei, please. I mean that… I wanted your first time-”

“What makes you think it was my first time?” Chu Wanning snapped.

Mo Ran spread his hands helplessly. Everything Chu Wanning said and did? “I guessed…”

“From what? What if it wasn’t my first time? What if I’d had sex before?”

“With who?”

“… a woman.”

“What was her name?”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Wanning,” Mo Ran said. He could see Chu Wanning was chewing the inside of his cheek. “I only mean that I wanted it to be special.”

“Oh.” Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut. “I see. You don’t think that it was special.”

“No! I mean, *I* wanted to make it special for *you*. Instead I was selfish. I was… I needed you so badly, and I was desperate…”

Chu Wanning finally looked at him. “Stupid,” he said, angrily wiping his cheeks. “Don’t you think that’s special?”

“I mean… I meant that I wanted, you know. Candles and a nice meal and to really… Make you enjoy yourself. Not when you’re injured and we’ve just gone through the most fucked-up…”

“But you said that you needed me. I think that’s special,” Chu Wanning said. His left hand was in its sling, but he wrapped his right across himself as well. “No one’s ever wanted me like that before. *I* thought it was special.”

“Wanning,” Mo Ran groaned, and summoned the courage to put his arms around him, as gently as he could. “Wanning. Now who’s stupid? That’s not special. That’s how I want you every minute of every day.”

Chu Wanning shook his head, but he didn't push Mo Ran away. "You've never…"

Mo Ran groaned. "Fucking hell. Aiyo, I've been trying to restrain myself! Been trying to be respectful, take things slow… This wasn't… It's not that that this was special or not special. This was the time that I wasn't able to hold myself back anymore… I was going mad, and I just wanted to speak to you and touch you, but the police had you and I was so worried… They had to take my phone, for the video, and I just about managed to delete that photo I took of you last night in time. Looking so beautiful. Before that- Not that you're not beautiful now!" he said, kissing Chu Wanning's ear and hair. "But a little… You know. I've got one of your dressings on me. I should be taking care of you and looking after you, not mauling you."

"Maybe you were. Looking after me. Maybe I liked it," Chu Wanning whispered, then buried his face in the crook of Mo Ran's neck. His shoulders hitched. "I thought that I was… That *you* thought I was…"

"What? What, baobei?"

Chu Wanning shrugged, just his right shoulder. "I didn't know what I was doing," he confessed.

Mo Ran very slowly started to rock them back and forth; he had gathered that Chu Wanning found that soothing. "I mean, unless your girlfriend had a penis…?"

"I didn't… I told a lie."

Mo Ran huffed in amusement. "Ah, it's not a lie if we both know it's not true."

"Shut up! It could have been true…"

"It could have been," Mo Ran lied easily. "That's what I mean, though. I've, you know. Been around the block. But with *you* I came as quickly as a teenager, and you didn't even know…

Because it's *you*. It's… I guess it's different when it's someone you love," he said, realising it himself as he said it.

Chu Wanning's ears were bright red.

Mo Ran stroked along the helix. "You were amazing," he said. "So beautiful. I want to do it slowly, next time."

"Who said there'll be a next time? Presumptuous."

"If my esteemed baobei will generously allow me to try again," Mo Ran amended with a laugh. "I want to see you properly. Your beautiful body. The faces you make."

"Shameless…"

"No, no. I feel very ashamed," he said, punctuating with a kiss. "Come on. Let me look after you now. Have a shower and go to sleep."

Chu Wanning shook his head. "I honestly couldn't stand up for it…"

It was testament to how exhausted Chu Wanning must be, to go to bed with dried blood in his hair, not even worried about the semen on his shirt. "No need to stand," Mo Ran said, unbuttoning his own shirt. "It's a walk-in. Sit on the floor, and I'll wash your hair."

"You're tired too."

"I am, but cold as well. And my muscles burn. The hot water will help. Come on."

Chu Wanning let himself be led into the *en suite*, which had a huge walk-in shower – more than enough room for them twice over. But in doing so he caught sight of his face.

A violent shudder ran over him. He stepped towards the mirror, and Mo Ran had to admit to himself that it looked bad: bruises, dressings, and the galaxy of red stars scattered across his face.

He remembered what Chu Wanning had said the night of his birthday. *"I'm so ugly…"*

Mo Ran pre-empted any distressed thoughts his baobei might be having by putting his arms around him and kissing his ear. "It'll be gone soon. Personally, I'd milk it for all it's worth. 'Yeah, I'm the hero you all saw on Douyin'. I'd wear the dressings for a year."

"Douyin. Is that the picture one?" Chu Wanning gamely asked, but his voice was flat.

"No, Douyin's videos. Come on. Cufflinks on the side…"

"When I arrived the doctor said I had petechiae."

"Is that the little dots?"

"I think so. She said that in strangulation cases if arterial blood is allowed but venous blood obstructed, the vessels above the… above the ligature can rupture."

Mo Ran smiled at him in wonder. "And you remember what she said perfectly."

"It was only a few hours ago." Chu Wanning looked away from his reflection. "She said they'd fade."

“Of course they will. Girls literally give it to themselves! *Gua sha*. They say it brings the blood to the surface of the skin and rejuvenates it or something.”

“Stupid,” Chu Wanning said again.

“If it works, I’ll give it a go.”

Chu Wanning shoved him with his good hand. “You’re such an idiot!”

“We can’t all be effortlessly beautiful,” Mo Ran said, catching his fist. “Do you have any idea how all the girls used to talk about you? They used to discuss what shampoo you used. If they knew you used a bar of soap – the same bar of soap for your face and your body! – they’d have an aneurysm.”

“I do use shampoo now.”

“Even conditioner, occasionally,” Mo Ran conceded. “I don’t know how your hair’s got so long, the way you treat it. I’ll give it a proper wash.”

“I can wash it.”

“With one hand? No. I’ve found my excuse to finally get my hands on your hair, and I’m sticking to it.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Chu Wanning said, but the affection was audible now. He avoided looking in the mirror though as he twisted the abused cummerbund around to unbuckle it.

“Let me.”

Chu Wanning looked uncomfortable, but allowed it.

“It’s just like looking after your back,” Mo Ran reassured him.

“It’s not. Not now we’ve…”

“No. Easier, now,” Mo Ran said. He was being very careful unbuttoning Chu Wanning’s shirt.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, you’ve already torn half the buttons off it,” Chu Wanning said, wriggling out of the sleeve. “Are you going to shower or not? If not, stop wasting my time and let me go to bed!”

“All right, all right!”

Mo Ran didn’t miss the wide-eyed look Chu Wanning gave him when he pulled his trousers off, before sitting on the floor of the shower, primly facing away, and brought his knees up to his chest. “Go on.”

“Yes, Shizun,” Mo Ran said. He tested the water on a trickle until it was hot enough, and then turned it to full-strength.

Even the first few seconds of heat and pressure began to unknot his shoulders. They were strained to hell and back from taking Chu Wanning’s weight, but they still didn’t hurt as much as the sight of Chu Wanning’s own left shoulder, angry and inflamed under the scarring.

The water that poured from them both was pink and dotted with flakes of ash.

It should have felt vulnerable, both of them naked, sitting on the floor of a shower. Mo Ran began to massage the shampoo into Chu Wanning’s scalp, as solicitious as a new mother, and

paid particularly attention to his temple, where the hair was stiff with blood. It *did* feel physically vulnerable. But emotionally, Mo Ran had the sensation that they were cocooned within a waterfall, in a room within a room within a room. Chu Wanning was facing away from him, and the lack of eye contact was relaxing for him as well.

"I like this shampoo," Mo Ran said. "It says it's 'argan oil', but it smells kind of citrussy." Mo Ran was almost sad that he wouldn't be able to smell Chu Wanning's usual woody, flowery scent, but then he realised that by using the same soap they would smell the same, and that felt like a balm. "Do you know what argan oil is?"

"Mn. It's from Morocco, made from nuts from the argan tree. I know they're important for Saharan anti-desertification."

"It doesn't really smell of nuts. Maybe they added some orange to it."

"I believe they're technically fruit, rather than nuts."

"I've never really thought about it – what's the difference?"

"It's a little complicated; nuts are actually fruits, or the seeds inside fruits. There's a difference between the botanical term and the culinary term, but… I'm too tired."

"Careful, close your eyes, I'm rinsing," he said, and poured the cupped water over Chu Wanning's crown. "And another."

Chu Wanning waited until the water ran clear. "Mo Ran. May I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Nangong Liu…"

Mo Ran closed his eyes. He'd known it was coming. "Ah. Um. Well. Nangong Si took a cheek swab from me. He said by dinner time we'll know for sure. But... yeah. I strongly suspect it's going to come back as a match."

"But. Um."

"I know. I… I'm not going to ask you to keep it a secret. But I'd rather tell my au- tell the Xues face-to-face, and I… It's not a nice story. I don't want to tell it twice."

"All right."

"I want to just… Our last night," he said.

Chu Wanning shoved his hand away and twisted around to look at him. "Who said it's our last night?"

"Don't say anything until you've heard it…"

"You're the one who said 'Don't leave me'. And I won't." He turned around again, lifting his chin. "Whatever you tell us… We can work through."

It was one thing to say it, Mo Ran thought. But he hadn't heard about the fire yet. "I don't deserve Wanning," he murmured instead.

"There's a lot you don't deserve. You don't deserve what people have done to you."

If only Chu Wanning knew… thank Heaven he didn't. For one more night at least.

They both moved as though they had lead weights attached to their limbs. Mo Ran couldn't do more than wrap Chu Wanning's hair in a towel and call it a day. They wordlessly decided on two things: first, that they would sleep in the same bed, and second, that that bed would be Mo Ran's.

Unfortunately, just as they were crawling under the covers, Chu Wanning's phone started ringing.

"Don't answer it," Mo Ran groaned, but was ignored.

"Ah, Xue Meng- Slow down. Slow down – we're fine. Xue Meng. Listen to me. We're both fine."

Mo Ran turned off the light.

"Yes, we're back at the hotel. Yes, they discharged me – I told you, I'm fine. What did- You did? Ahhh, that's amazing news. That's really- Of course I'm proud of you. Silly boy. I would have been proud anyway, that you took part in the final even with- 187, really? Was it the processor like we thought? Ah, well, without sponsoring we were never going to get a better chip than that. Much better to compete fairly, with integrity."

Mo Ran rolled over and tugged the duvet higher.

"Yes, that's all I- *Yes*, I'm happy that you won. I'm… I'm delighted. Really. I'm saying I was *already* proud. This is additional, so enjoy it- Xue Meng. Xue Meng, listen to me. Do I sound like I'm injured? Do I sound like I'm on my deathbed? I sound *annoyed*, because that's what I am. Of *course* you have to attend the ceremony. How else are you going to give me a photograph of you and your parents? All that time I let you take off for this competition, and now you've won it you want to skip the prize-giving? Don't be so stupid. We're not even leaving Linyi until tomorrow morning, and it's, what, a seven hour drive to Shanghai? You can stay for a leisurely dinner after the ceremony and you'll probably still be there before us."

Mo Ran had the delicious thought of giving Chu Wanning a long, slow handjob – even better, a *blowjob* – while he tried to play the sternly reassuring educator to a neurotic Xue Meng on

the other end of the phone. Despite his utter physical exhaustion, his cock was highly interested in this idea as well; Chu Wanning biting on the back of his hand to stay silent while Xue Meng talked about processors and mounting brackets and clamps – *clamps*, now, there was an idea –

Then his mind slammed back to reality. Tomorrow evening. The day after, at the latest.

He'd tell his story, and Chu Wanning would probably want nothing to do with him. If by some miracle he still stood by him, the Xues never could. It would destroy Chu Wanning's only real friendship.

"Yes, Mo Ran's fine too. We'll tell you the whole thing in detail tomorrow, when we see you. Listen, I'm exhausted- No, no, you all go and enjoy the ceremony. I'll talk to you later. I need to sleep. All right. Goodbye."

Chu Wanning finally hung up; for a brief second, Mo Ran could hear Xue Meng's tinny voice asking if he wanted to speak to his parents.

Mo Ran wrapped his arms around Chu Wanning and felt the damp towel against his cheek. "He won then?"

"Apparently someone told him that I wouldn't get better if he didn't," Chu Wanning said, lightly pinching his arm.

"Those were *not* my words."

"You gave him the impression I was in some kind of coma and could only be woken by a victorious result."

"He's such a drama queen." Mo Ran tried to put from his mind that this might be the last time he held Chu Wanning like this, warm under the covers. "Wanning…"

“Mn?” Chu Wanning sounded half-asleep already, but his right hand was spread across Mo Ran’s chest. Protecting his heart.

I love you so much. “Nothing. I just like to say your name.”

“Mm.” Chu Wanning shifted a little closer. “Mo Ran.”

Chapter 58: Gold Nest, Silver Nest

Chapter Notes

> If I was a bit more on the ball, I would have posted this for Mo Ran's birthday yesterday, but... he might not have appreciated it. 😭 Happy Birthday, Mo Ran! ✨🥂
>
> This chapter contains the story of how Mo Ran came to live with the Xues, so there are MAJOR SPOILERS for the end of 2ha.
>
> Content warnings: Abuse, arson, rape, murder, including rape and murder of a child (all reported indirectly, not shown 'on screen').

It was with great reluctance that evening that they crawled out of bed and staggered, muscles violently protesting, along the corridor to Nangong Si's room. They ordered room service; Ye Wangxi suggested that they all have soup in solidarity with Chu Wanning, which all three men vetoed with varying degrees of vehemence.

Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi brought them up somewhat up to date with what the police were saying and the evidence that Nangong Xu had uploaded. Mo Ran followed it as well as he was able, but their presence was grating. He wanted to spend the night in the presence of Chu Wanning, safe and warm in bed, not pretending to give a fuck about this politician or that businessman.

To their credit, they realised this, and parted as soon as they had all finished eating. Chu Wanning was pale, and headed down the corridor to take his next dose of painkillers.

Mo Ran hung back. "Did, er… Did the test…?"

"Yeah," Nangong Si said. "Yeah. We're half-brothers. Share the same father."

Despite himself, despite his certainty, some final sliver of him had hoped… "Right. Thanks."

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow,” Nangong Si. “Lawyers in Shanghai want to meet us.”

“Whatever.” It wasn't like Mo Ran was going to be in the will. They probably just wanted to make him sign something to say he wouldn’t go after Nangong Si for anything. “But tomorrow is for my family. The day after, if I’m still… Whatever you want, the day after tomorrow.”

Nangong Si gave him a very strange look, but Mo Ran was too low to fight about it. He sloped back down the corridor to their rooms.

Chu Wanning’s hair was loose, damp and slightly wavy from the earlier shower. Mo Ran picked up a hairbrush and sat behind him.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.” Chu Wanning’s hair was like a river of night, shining and as soft as raw silk. “I used to do it for my mother. When she was dying.”

“I’m so sorry, Mo Ran.”

“It’s all right. It was a long time ago.” And Chu Wanning himself had eased the pain a little. Partially due to comparison – Mo Ran had had nine years with his mother, and had never doubted for a second how much she loved and adored him – while Chu Wanning had been abandoned, left to die by a mother he never knew, and adopted by a cold and controlling man with ambitions of his own.

But partially it was Chu Wanning himself, how gentle he could be, how cute, how funny, how kind. A prick too, of course, he thought with a smile, but he loved that too, now. It made his own love feel special. That he had managed to decode something that no one else had.

It felt *so good*, to love this passionately again.

“She’d have loved you,” Mo Ran said. “She was really clever. And she loved music. She was a student at the Linyi Conservatory, when…”

“What did she play?”

“The pipa. But when that broke she couldn’t afford another one. She bought a guitar from someone going cheap.”

“One of my favourite pieces is for the pipa,” Chu Wanning said. “There have been transcriptions for the guqin, but the version for the pipa is beautiful. *Yang Chun Bai Xue*. I have it on my phone, let me find it...”

“Not- Not tonight, baobei.”

“Oh. Right, of course – sorry…”

“Another time,” Mo Ran said, kissing Chu Wanning’s ear. Even in his despair, it always made him smile to see Chu Wanning wriggle; his ears were so sensitive.

He tied Chu Wanning’s hair in a long, loose plait. He turned on the television while Chu Wanning went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, but Rufeng was being discussed on every news channel.

He didn’t sleep. He was staring into the darkness when Chu Wanning awoke with a horrific gasp, scrabbling at his throat.

“It’s all right,” Mo Ran murmured, tightening his hold. “Just a dream. Just a dream. Breathe, Wanning…”

“Can’t- can’t-”

“You can. You can. You’re doing so well. Just breathe…”

It took a good twenty minutes to calm Chu Wanning down again. Chu Wanning when he was asleep lacked any of the harshness or anger of Chu Wanning awake, like a cat without claws. He looked at Mo Ran for reassurance and comfort, obedient to his words and tone, and on any other night it would have made him think of how else he could persuade Chu Wanning to enter that frame of mind in bed…

Right now, it just broke his heart. Protective pity punctured the numb march towards doom.

It was the best part of his night.

They left Linyi first thing in the morning, and Mo Ran hoped he’d never see the beautiful shithole of a city again. Beautiful buildings, beautiful people, and rotten souls (save one, his powder-blue angel). He gave it the finger as they passed the city boundaries.

Ye Wangxi drove for all seven hours, handling the hired car as though she’d driven it all her life. Nangong Si spent most of it on the phone, either to the police, to his lawyers, or to various money people. The sums he was discussing made Mo Ran’s eyes burn with anger.

“They’ve landed,” Chu Wanning said softly as they drove through the outskirts of Taizhou. “They bought seats in First Class and slept on the way. Xue Meng’s texting me the hotel they’re going to now. They’ve got a suite for them and two rooms for us.”

“Could you ask them to book us a room too?” Nangong Si said. “I’ll pay them back.”

“*Two* rooms,” Ye Wangxi corrected. “But he’ll still pay them back.”

Mo Ran didn't say anything. But when Chu Wanning had sent the message, his hand drifted across the middle seat until it pressed against the side of Mo Ran's.

*

They reached Shanghai in the middle of the afternoon, but it was dark by the time greetings had been endured, congratulations given, injuries exclaimed over, introductions made, and a summary received of everything that had happened. Chu Wanning bravely led as much of the retelling as possible, apparently hoping to spare Mo Ran, but eventually his voice gave out, and it was between Mo Ran and Nangong Si to describe the rest of Nangong Xu's actions while Wang Chuqing mixed up a concoction with plenty of honey to soothe his throat.

Xue Meng was white-faced, with violet smudges of exhaustion under his eyes. "But I don't understand why he spoke to you at all? Why did… I don't get it."

The moment had come. Mo Ran felt as though he were floating, high above himself. Soon it would be over.

He looked at Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi. "Would you mind if I spoke to my family alone?"

It was the last time he'd ever be able to say that, and it lodged in his throat.

"No, of course not." They stood up, and Nangong Si gave him an awkward smile. "I've got calls to make anyway… See you later. If you…"

"Mn." Mo Ran managed a simulacrum of a smile in return, but it died when he saw Chu Wanning standing up to leave as well. "No! No. Wanning. *Please*."

Chu Wanning stopped. He sat down again on the sofa next to Mo Ran, so close that their thighs pressed together. "I didn't know if…"

“No. Of course *you*…”

Xue Meng looked between the two of them, and Mo Ran realised that Wang Chuqing must have told him about them on the way over. He didn’t care whether it bothered Xue Meng or not; he was about to hear something far, far worse, so he took Chu Wanning’s hand.

Chu Wanning immediately shifted and held his with both his own. “It’s all right,” he said quietly.

Mo Ran smiled tremulously. “I don’t know where to start.”

“The beginning is traditional.”

Mo Ran shook his head. “Not an introductory statement? An abstract?”

Chu Wanning understood when he meant instantly. “Mn. Or would you prefer a panel introduction before the paper?”

Mo Ran squeezed his eyes shut and nodded. Heaven bless Chu Wanning.

He felt him shift on the sofa, turning to face the Xues. “I’ll just come out with it. Mo Ran is not your nephew.”

Mo Ran heard Xue Meng’s sound of astonishment, and he opened his eyes. What he saw surprised him in turn.

Xue Zhengyong and Wang Chuqing’s eyes were wide. But the shock apparent on Xue Meng’s face… wasn’t there.

“His father was Nangong Liu,” Chu Wanning continued.

And *there* was the shock. They were surprised by who his father was, but *not* that it wasn’t Xue Duanrong.

They knew. Somehow, on some level, *they already knew*.

Xue Meng was opening his mouth to speak, and Mo Ran cut him off; once Xue Meng started, he’d never stop.

“My mother was a woman called Duan Yihan,” he said. “Not Mo Guiyin. She was a music student at Linyi Conservatory.”

After that, it became a little easier. Chu Wanning had made the initial incision, and already knew this part of the story. The Xues were merciful enough not to interrupt him, even Xue Meng, as he talked about the HPV, Guyueye, the busking, the cancer.

“After she died I went to Xiangtan. She told me that her best friend lived there, Xun Fengrou, and that she would look after me. And she did, as much as she could. But what my mother hadn’t quite explained to me was that Xun Fengrou was working as a prostitute, in a brothel owned by Mo Guiyin.”

Xue Zhengyong made a noise at that, something caught between a hum and an exhalation.

“It was… okay. Most of the time. I’d wake up early, cook breakfast for everyone, go to school - I was Mo Ran, a cousin from the countryside - then come back and cook dinner. We each had our jobs. Cooking was mine. Xun Fengrou was the receptionist, Huang Huiya did the cleaning, Tan Zijin did the laundry – brothels go through a hell of a lot of sheets… He Yunyu was usually in the kitchen with me. I’d do homework if I had time, fuck it if I didn’t. If she didn’t have a client, He Yunyu would do the homework while I did the cooking – she was really smart, and she was only nineteen, so it was relatively fresh in her memory…”

His hands were shaking. Wang Chuqing rose and poured out a glass of water for him; he couldn't meet her eyes, but Mo Ran accepted it with a nod of gratitude.

"When I was twelve or thirteen – it was spring, so I'm not sure which – I heard Xun Fengrou with a client. She started screaming, so I ran up to help her. The bastard had hit her, she was trying to push him off, so I pulled him back as well. He fell off, and between us and Huang Huiya we managed to lock him out. But Mo Guiyin was furious. He was a regular, so… The next morning, Xun Fengrou had left a note and gone. I never saw her again."

Mo Ran's teeth knocked against the glass; the water was so cold it made them ache. "Mo Guiyin got ten times worse after that. But her son, he was... awful. Awful to me, awful to the ladies, awful to the girls at school or in the neighbourhood. He was in trouble when I was thirteen for taking pictures up girls' skirts at school, but by the time I was fourteen Mo Guiyin had had to pay off two people whose daughters he'd assaulted. One of them he'd tried to rape, until her dad caught him by chance. And at home… Mo Nian was five years younger than He Yunyu, but what could she do? She usually gave in to whatever he wanted, and Mo Guiyin let that go on even if it meant losing what money she got by going out with the johns."

He put the glass down, and dared to glance at Chu Wanning. The expression on his face steadied him before the final plunge into the void – those phoenix-shaped eyes always reassured him, somehow.

"I slept on a futon in the upstairs corridor. One night, I woke up, and I could hear Mo Guiyin *screaming* at Mo Nian. He was the apple of her eye, she never shouted at him, so he must have done something *really* bad. It woke up the girls too, and they brought me into their room; it was two bunkbeds, so I slept in there occasionally, if it was cold or if Madame was on the warpath. They'd get punished every time, but they still let me in. And she was *pissed* that night. She was banging on the door for me to come out, but Huang Huiya said not to go, that I should wait until she'd calmed down in the morning. She left pretty quickly, so I thought maybe…"

"And it actually seemed like she had. I made a real quick breakfast and ran out of there before she woke up, but after school she was waiting for me in the house. She was so nice. She'd bought some pastries, all wrapped up – you know the flakey ones, with red bean paste in them? She said that she needed me to do something for her, that she'd treated me like her own son, that she'd clothed and fed me, and now she needed me to do something to help the family. Because that's what family did for each other."

He looked at the Xues and smiled crookedly. Then the smile died.

"The house had a cellar. It was mostly rubbish, tools, the really stained, nasty, mouldy old mattresses that she couldn't be bothered to get rid of properly. It was so hot. Sweltering hot, but there were all these candles burning. Scented candles. Sticks of incense, everywhere – all the different smells together. There was so much smoke I could barely see… There was. One of the mattresses had been put on the floor, and there was a body on it."

Xue Meng gasped, and Mo Ran felt a dark flash of angry amusement. *Yes, shocking, isn't it, Mengmeng?*

"There was a tofu-seller who had a stall opposite us, and he had a little girl who'd come and mind the place when he ate. She was about thirteen, I think? Sweet girl. She wore her hair in little bunches, you know, like… She… Well. She was dead, and she'd been raped. I could see that. It was… bad."

"Mo Nian?" Xue Zhengyong said. He was pale, but his face was still.

"Yeah. Yeah. And Madame, Mo Guiyin, she started to say that she needed me to say that I'd done it. And she would say it was an accident, that I was a good boy who'd got carried away, I was younger so they might be more lenient, but this was how I could pay her back for all her kindness. That for a mother to be parted from her son was the worst pain in the world, and wouldn't I want to spare a mother that? I already had no mother to grieve for my absence. But I… She was so bloated, you know? The girl. And I realised that once you were close she was beginning to smell, and that's why all the incense and candles were lit. I said what about the grief of a father who lost his daughter? We had to tell her father, he'd be looking for her, we had to tell the police. I panicked. I was stupid. And it gave her the time to get up the stairs before me and lock the door."

He felt Chu Wanning squeezing his hand. Tears were running down Chu Wanning's cheeks, fast and silent. But he nodded, and gave a tremulously reassuring smile.

"How long?" Chu Wanning asked softly.

“Dunno. I was… It can’t have been more than a few hours, because the incense went out, but the bigger candles didn’t. I kind of… It’s going to sound really stupid, but it felt like she was still in there. Like the smoke was… Like her body was the centre of gravity, and all the smoke was swirling around it, and it was just a matter of time before it all coalesced in her and she became something else. Before she sat up.”

He laughed. It was a harsh, grating sound. “Stupid. Like a film. I’d been hammering on the door, hammering for hours – my hands were as swollen as hers by that point. But eventually they came down, the two of them: Mo Guiyin, and Mo Nian. The thing is… The girl. Wang Fanghua. She’d died with her eyes open. And that bastard hadn’t even closed them. Neither of them had. And those words just kept going around in my head – that I didn’t have a mother to grieve me. And I…”

Right now, they were looking at him with horror and pity. Mo Ran’s gaze went from face to face, fixing the sight in his memory: the last time they would look at him without loathing.

“I started to…” He gestured swiping violently, to and fro. “All the candles. Onto the mattress. Onto Wang Fanghua. They both ran forward to stop me, only… Like I said. There were tools in the cellar. I had a screwdriver hidden behind my back, and I stabbed Mo Nian in the neck. And as his mother was trying to stop the bleeding, I went up the stairs. I locked the door. And then I… I don’t know what was in my head. I didn’t want to live anymore. I wanted to erase everything. Mo Guiyin was hammering on the door, but obviously, I knew perfectly well how that door would hold. And I…”

His tears were falling so quickly that he could feel them splattering on his hand, the one that Chu Wanning wasn’t clutching.

“I opened up the special drawer in the kitchen. Only Mo Guiyin and Mo Nian were allowed food from that one. There were mooncakes and wine and grapes, and I sat at the table and ate them. The grapes were the best. She was hammering on the door to be let out, I don’t know whether Mo Nian was dead by that point, but I just… I don’t know why. The smoke was coming out from under the door, and I thought, the three of us can die together. Even when I was coughing on the smoke I was eating the grapes, drinking the wine… I felt like I’d gone mad. I think I did go mad. I was laughing.”

Mo Ran was sobbing now. His shoulders ached with the force of them, but for the first time in years, something in his chest was easing. The worst had come. He'd go to prison, or be executed, and it would all be over. His only regret was the pain he would cause Chu Wanning, and the pain he had already caused the Xues.

"The next thing I knew was a fireman carrying me out. What I didn't realise until a few hours later was that- That the girls had tried to alert someone. Huang Huiya, Tan Zijin, and He Yunyu. They knew something was wrong. So Mo Guiyin had locked them in their room, until after I'd confessed. I didn't know that; they'd always be out, at that time of night. I promise, that was- I didn't know. But they all died too. I killed five people. I'm not your nephew. I killed your nephew."

Wang Chuqing was crying. They weren't a continuous silent pouring like Chu Wanning's, or the wretched sobs choking Mo Ran; her breath was hitching.

It was how Tan Zijin had used to cry, when a client hit her.

Mo Ran had to struggle through the rest of his tale, before he died. It felt quite plausible. "I ended up in a gang, as you know. I smuggled things from province to province on the buses. Burner phones at first, then drugs once they trusted me. I was caught and arrested, and that's when your PI found me. And I thought, why not? Mo Nian raped and killed that girl, and he'd been dead for nearly three years, and he was *still winning*. Still, allowances were made for him; still, he'd escape punishment. Duan Ran would go to prison for years for drug smuggling, but Mo Nian - *Mo Ran* - would be sprung by his rich family and go and live in luxury. So why not be Mo Ran, just for a couple of days?"

He wiped his face, a futile gesture. "I thought that I'd nick any cash or phones on the first night and make a run for it. But then you were way out in the countryside, and getting out of a tiny place like Wuchang with stolen shit would be tough. So I stayed, thought I just needed a plan, needed some ready cash. But then you were… You were *kind*."

He couldn't go on any more. He pulled his hand back from Chu Wanning and covered his face, unable to look at the Xues for the shame of it. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Ran'er."

Xue Meng was crying now as well. “But- But *Dad*, he- He…”

“Ah…” Chu Wanning suddenly said. “Zhengyong. You knew.”

Mo Ran looked up. Xue Zhengyong’s eyes were full of tears, but they had not fallen.

“I didn’t know. Not… Hm. Not consciously, perhaps. I suspected. But I didn’t allow myself to know…” He sighed. “Or maybe I’m lying to myself even now. Maybe some part of me knew all along.”

“I said it,” Wang Chuqing whispered. “When Ran’er first came to us. I *said* I didn’t think he was your nephew.”

“You did. The one time I’ve ever shouted at you. The one…” He swallowed and looked back at Mo Ran. “The investigator gave me a dossier. He said that Mo Guiyin was a cruel, greedy woman, who kept an unknown young boy as little better than a slave in her home. Her son was an arrogant bully who’d been accused of sexual assault by one girl and attempted rape by another. Your aunt, she said that she was worried about having such a boy in our house. That’s why we sent you to that English immersion camp, Meng’er, for that summer. So that if Ran’er was like the investigator said… But then the boy who came to us was so scared, so quiet. Even after three years on the streets, smuggling heaven knows what for heaven knows who, you were so polite and unsure. You were nothing like the dossier. She said that you didn’t look like the photograph, or my brother. I said that you must have scared by the other gang members, that living rough changed the way a person looks. And if you sometimes took a moment to answer to ‘Mo Ran’, instead of ‘Ran’er’…”

Xue Zhengyong’s tears were finally falling. Wang Chuqing seemed torn between whom to comfort – her nephew, her son, or her husband – and after a moment decided on the latter.

“I think that I’ve always known. That’s why I’ve never had a DNA test done. Everyone told me I had to, but I said no, no, he’s the spitting image of my brother. And you’re not! Ah, you look nothing like him... But I was so deep in my grief and my guilt that I couldn’t bear the thought that I’d been too late. That the last of my brother was already gone. So I used you, just as much as Mo Guiyin did.”

“No! I was using you!”

“Yes,” Xue Zhengyong said simply. “For what, though, Ran’er? For food? Shelter? An education? All things you deserve, that *everyone* deserves, and that you were denied. *I* was using you to fill a void made by my own grief, my own guilt, and my own insecurity. I used you as a crutch in my denial and my delusion, and I’ve made you live a lie all this time. I’ve made you live in fear that when we found out, we’d no longer be a family. My boy – my nephew – can *you* forgive *me?”*

“I killed your nephew!” Mo Ran wailed. “I killed people! I need to go to prison! I’ll hand myself in-!”

“You were a *victim*, Ran’er. You were treated so horrifically, so appallingly – you didn’t mean to hurt those girls. It was Mo Guiyin who imprisoned them. It was Mo Nian who-” Xue Zhengyong shook his head. “Don’t hand yourself in. Please. Ran’er. What good will losing another nephew do me?”

He couldn’t restrain himself. Mo Ran got up and blindly staggered to Xue Zhengyong, who caught him in his arms.

“It’s all right. Ran’er, it’s all right.”

“But I killed your family-”

“My family abused you. Things are even between us. You’re the nephew I love. Ran’er, this means that I don’t have to worry that you did such terrible things when you were a child. What you did do, I can understand that so much more. Do *you* understand? This is... this is a cleansing.”

Mo Ran stepped back, and instantly Wang Chuqing was there, pulling him down into another embrace. Behind him, he felt Xue Meng put his arms around them.

Xues are beautiful, he thought deliriously. *Xues are beautiful.*

And over his aunt's head, he could only stare in shock as Chu Wanning stepped forward and threw his arms around Xue Zhengyong's neck.

Chapter 59: Moments of Grace

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to WaterGoat for your help with this chapter!

Mo Ran felt as though he was drunk even before Xue Zhengyong raided the mini-bar and rang down to the concierge for whisky. They had migrated to the floor, and he lay with his head in Wang Chuqing's lap as she stroked his hair and her husband poured out the drinks.

With the new context, he went over the incident in Rufeng again – what Nangong Xu said, what he did. Xue Meng was clearly caught between horror and morbid curiosity, but Mo Ran felt full of benevolent love and willingly submitted to a full interrogation.

But he was worried about Chu Wanning. He was smiling despite looking as exhausted as the rest of them, but there was a tension around his eyes and in his jaw. Half-hidden within his sling, his left hand was clenched. His right held behind his back, down the side of the sofa, but at this angle Mo Ran saw him stretch out his fingers, bend them one by one, make them a claw. He'd sustained a nasty cut on it from his Leatherman while he was sawing through the noose, and stretching it like that must have been painful. His leg was jigging up and down.

Chu Wanning's face was a porcelain mask, emotionless save for a slight, reassuring smile. But his body seemed to indicate a growing distress.

Mo Ran didn't know how the others couldn't see it. But a year ago he wouldn't even have been that generous – he would have taken offence at Chu Wanning being the only one to sit on a piece of furniture rather than with the family on the floor. He'd have interpreted it as Chu Wanning being physically and intellectually above them all. The mask of benign indifference would have seemed aloof, haughty, perhaps bored by the family drama.

But now he was literate. Now he could read Chu Wanning. And Chu Wanning was as upset as Mo Ran had ever seen him.

“You okay?” he asked.

Chu Wanning offered something like a rictus in return. “Of course.”

Maybe he was in pain. “How’s your throat?”

“Fine.”

“Do you need some more painkillers-?”

“Mo Ran, I am absolutely fine. Do stop fussing. Though I will take a white wine if your uncle is pouring.”

Wang Chuqing seemed to have caught something of Mo Ran’s train of thought. “Should you, if there’s codeine…?”

“It’s a lower dose. It’ll be fine.”

Xue Zhengyong, perhaps still riding the high of a voluntary hug, handed Chu Wanning his glass of wine. Mo Ran and his aunt (his aunt!) shared a glance, but wordlessly decided to leave it for the moment.

No sooner had Chu Wanning taken a sip than his phone buzzed. “Nangong Si. He’s asking whether they should eat on their own.”

“They should come here,” Wang Chuqing said. “He’s part of the family now, isn’t he? And he just lost his father, no matter what kind of man he was.”

“Mn.” Chu Wanning messaged back, slowly – he was an index-finger texter.

“You and Nangong Si a package deal now?” Xue Meng said, nudging Mo Ran. “Can’t we keep him and send you back?”

“You haven’t met him yet,” Mo Ran said with a grin. “He can be a total tit.”

“A tit with several billion dollars though,” Xue Meng said.

“Aren’t you going to be pissed off that he’s so much richer than you? What about your top ten lists?”

“I’m not interested in all that anymore,” Xue Meng replied airily. “It just means that he can always buy the drinks. I beat the UAE team even thought there were four of them and they were sponsored, so money isn’t everything.”

Mo Ran groaned. “Auntie!”

“He did very well,” Wang Chuqing said with a proud smile.

Within a few minutes, Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi were at the door, bearing the room service menus. Chu Wanning seemed more interested in a second glass of white wine than in his shredded chicken congee, but Mo Ran watched him like a hawk.

“I’m *fine*,” he hissed as Wang Chuqing dished out the orders.

“You’re really pale.”

“We drove for seven hours, and the anti-inflammatories make me feel sick. That’s all.”

“Is it…?” Mo Ran lowered his voice. “Is it about what I told you?”

“*No.*” For a second the porcelain mask shattered; Mo Ran watched Chu Wanning struggle to force the pieces back together. “No. It really is just nausea. Tiredness. And… No, Mo Ran. It’s not *you*.”

Mo Ran wanted to ask what the hell that meant, but he was called back into the conversation by Nangong Si. Later, he told himself. His Chu Wanning-senses were tingling. Something was going on.

The topic of conversation was apparently what they’d be doing tomorrow. “I’m really sorry,” Nangong Si was saying. “They’re insisting on another DNA test; I told them, but they want to do a few of their own, just to be 100% sure.”

“It’s fine,” Mo Ran said. “It’s just the cheek swabs again, isn’t it? Like I said, whatever you want me to do, it’s fine.”

“Now, Mo Ran, you should have your own lawyer there too,” Xue Zhengyong said.

“Your uncle’s right. The case is pretty cut and dried, but it’d be good for you to have your own representation.”

Mo Ran put down his bowl of chao nian gao and rubbed his eyes. “But why would I… Is tomorrow the reading of the will or something? I already told you, I’m not going to challenge it or anything.”

Nangong Si went white.

“Shit,” he said, and put his own plate down. “You don’t- *shit*.”

“What?” Fear instantly lanced through him. “Wait, what?”

“He didn’t have a will,” Nangong Si said. “I didn’t understand why you were being so blasé about it.”

“What the fuck does that mean? Of course he had a will.”

Everyone was sitting up straight now. Wang Chuqing’s hand was over her mouth.

Nangong Si was shaking his head. “He used to, but he had it voided and destroyed.”

“He was, like, the fourth richest man in China! Why the fuck wouldn’t he have a will?!”

“For exactly that reason. He used to say that if you have children, writing a will is writing a motive. Forged wills and convenient murders have happened before. A will can be challenged in a court. Someone can claim the document was forged, or swapped, or there’s a newer one. Sometimes people will sue and say they were forgotten, which is why if you’re clever, if you want to really ensure someone gets nothing, you can leave them one yuan. That proves they were left out deliberately. But my father said he had a clear and obvious heir, his son, and by national law, which is much, *much* more difficult to challenge, everything he owned would go to his child.”

“But he had more than one child…” Mo Ran said. “Surely he knew that? My mother *told* him.”

“Maybe he really didn’t believe her,” Nangong Si said apologetically.

“When did he have the will voided?” Chu Wanning asked carefully. “How long ago?”

“About ten years, his lawyers said…”

Chu Wanning looked at Mo Ran. “When his other son died in a fire.”

“What the *fuck*?” Mo Ran pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes until he saw fireworks. “You think he was keeping tabs on me?”

“That would make sense,” Xue Zhengyong said. “I have a will because I have all sorts of scholarships, gifts, portions for you, for Wifey, for my friends. But if I wanted *only* Meng’er to inherit, then having no will would be the simplest and most airtight way to do that.”

“But I’m illegitimate,” Mo Ran pointed out.

“It’s irrelevant. Under Chinese law, in the absence of a will, every child inherits an equal portion. Illegitimacy, adoption – irrelevant.”

“It’s the law,” Nangong Si said. “Mo Ran… You know, there are professionals who can help you manage it. Stocks and shares, property-”

“Fuck off!” Mo Ran’s chest felt tight, and his head was spinning. “How much money did he even *have*?”

“Well, with everything Nangong Xu released, the solicitors are saying we should just be ready to sacrifice half of it. Criminal gains, back taxes – no inheritance taxes to worry about, obviously, but in case there was evasion or fraud anywhere – have a really good forensic accountant go over everything, voluntarily hand it over to please the government. With half gone, they want us to divide it into three shares, in case another child comes forward. So, with all that, they think each of us will receive a portion of four billion.”

Mo Ran was going to be sick. “*Four billion yuan*?”

Nangong Si, if possible, looked even more shocked. “Mo Ran… It’s four billion *dollars*.”

“What is that even- How much-?”

“About 29 billion yuan,” Chu Wanning said. “Given the current exchange rate.”

“How much… The Guyueye compensation. What Nangong Xu stole, for the Butterfly Bone… How much…?”

“22 billion.”

Mo Ran shook his head. “This can’t be happening.”

Xue Meng was looking around the devastated faces in confusion. “Am I missing something here? Is everyone else crazy, or is it me? You’re a *billionaire*.”

Mo Ran rounded on Xue Meng. “It’s fucking *obscene*!”

Nangong Si made a noise that sounded like a scoff. “Mo Ran, come on. I get that it’s a shock, but isn’t this what you’d want? What anyone would want?”

He wanted to get out of this room.

He wanted to cling to Chu Wanning.

He wanted his mum.

The tension and exhaustion of the day, with all its suspense and revelations and emotions, suddenly overwhelmed him.

“You have no *fucking*- Do you know,” he said savagely, “that when my mother died, a municipal burial cost… There was no way. No chance in hell. I was nine, and everything I owned was in my schoolbag. She was cremated. But to take her ashes in a fucking cardboard box they wanted four hundred yuan. It might as well have been four billion.”

“I’m sorry,” Nangong Si said.

“No! Okay, no – I… I listened to Wanning’s tape recording, of your mum’s funeral. And I get how much it must have hurt. How hard it was. To be fourteen, and have to carry her portrait at the front of the procession, and then put her in a mausoleum with all the flowers, but *I* stole a cardboard box from the desk of some petty bastard in the crematorium and jumped out of the window into a bin. And I- It was snowing, but it was that shitty, slushy, wet snow. And I ran until I couldn’t run any more, and the snow was getting into the box and she was- she was turning into mud in my hands. And I…”

“Mo Ran,” Chu Wanning whispered. Mo Ran took his hand and squeezed it.

“I wanted to lie down in the snow and die. And people were walking past me and thought I was dirty, but it was her. It was her. I was carrying her, and people just thought she was filth.”

“Ran’er,” Wang Chuqing said. “It’s all right. It’s been a long day.”

“She said before she died that she wanted me to go to Xiangtan to live with her best friend. But the train cost 193 yuan. The bus was 127.” He remembered the numbers, burnt into his brain. “I didn’t have one, to buy a bun to eat.”

He swallowed. Chu Wanning was rubbing his thumb against the back of his hand, and he tried to focus on that.

“You didn’t say,” Xue Zhengyong said, “how you got from Linyi to Xiangtan.”

“No. It was… The snow wouldn’t stop. She just melted away. I couldn’t stop her from dying, and I couldn’t stop her from… I thought I’d have to beg. Pickpocket. Try to steal enough to get to Xiangtan. But the snow didn’t stop, so no one was walking by, and those who did were wrapped up with scarves and hats. They didn’t see me, or they didn’t want to, and walked right past me.”

He nearly didn’t say it. His encounter with his saviour-gege, his angel, was too precious to his heart, but the gates had been unlocked, the dam had been broken, and now he couldn’t stop.

“And then… A boy was walking past, with his father. He was wearing a blue coat – lovely, light blue, made of wool. He wasn’t that much older than me – like, middle school, maybe? But he was carrying a briefcase.”

Chu Wanning’s hand suddenly, strangely, tightened around his.

“He stopped, and he… He looked at. Right at me. And it was like he’d never *seen* a beggar before. He went, ‘Oh!’ I still remember it. And I thought he was going to ask his father why I was so dirty, but he took off his coat and he wrapped it around me. ‘You must be so cold.’ And then his hat and put it on me, and then his gloves, but they were all white. Mum… Mum would stain them. But he said my hands were too cold for the gloves, and he… he took them, and breathed on them to warm them. It hurt, and I started crying. And he looked like he was going to start crying too, and I felt so bad, that I was making him sad. But he wiped her with a silk handkerchief, and my face, and then he folded it and gave it to me.”

Mo Ran exhaled, still feeling that old pain. That handkerchief had burned with the coat, in the fire.

Chu Wanning’s hand on top of his was shaking.

“His father was impatient. He had a horrible voice – he was saying ‘Come on, come on, we’re going to be late!’ I can remember every word. Like it happened this morning.”

"*I know, I know,*"" the boy had said. "*It hurts because your hands are so cold. But they need to be a little bit warmer before Gege puts the gloves on. Didi is so brave.*"

He'd breathed on Ran'er's fingers again, and it had felt like he was breathing warm air into Ran'er's own lungs. When he could move his fingers, the older boy had manoeuvred his hands into the gloves, making sure that each finger found its home.

"*There*," he'd said, and finally took of his white scarf, wrapping it around Ran'er's dirty neck and face. "*It looks very nice on you*." It had tickled, and the soft, warm smell made him want to sleep, to sleep and die and stay forever in that perfect moment of grace.

He remembered the existence of his audience. "The boy was… odd. He said, 'They can wait for me. This boy can't.' His father said something about money, about how much money the meeting was worth, and the boy ignored him. His dad started saying how arrogant the boy had become, how entitled, and the boy looked up at him and said that he had other offers. It was so weird. Like his briefcase. He was like a businessman, but he was a child. He asked his father for some cash, and when his father refused, he said that he'd be rude in the meeting and go to England or America instead. That *I* was more important."

No one had ever defended him like that before. For the first time since his mother had died, he'd felt like a human being again. He felt like Ran'er again.

"Well, that got him his way, his father gave him some cash, and he said 'Gege's going to get us some nice hot pork bao. I'll be back in a second and we can eat together.' He went down the road, to a shop where… And his father looked down at me, and he took out some notes. And he said that he'd give me three hundred yuan to not be there by the time his son got back."

The guilt of it still ate at him. He'd been prepared to lie and steal, but abandoning that boy, who'd been so kind to him… "What could I do? It was more than twice the bus ticket. It meant I could buy food on the way. So I took the money and ran. But I didn't… He really did come back, with three bao. And his father said that I'd stolen his coat and hat and scarf, but I couldn't go back then and give them back, could I? His father said that he could tell I'd been a thief, that this should be a lesson to him, that he could walk to their meeting in the snow without a coat or hat or gloves."

Despite the agony of that memory, the injustice of the lie, Mo Ran smiled. “The boy didn’t care. He said good. That I needed it more than him. That I couldn’t have gone far, that he needed to find me.”

Mo Ran sniffed, half-laughing, half-crying. “They had a screaming fight, right there. The dad was yanking his arm one way, the boy pulling the other. But he convinced him eventually that I really wasn’t coming back. ‘You’re so gullible, you’ll trust anyone!’ Pretty funny, really. Ironic, you know? So the boy put the bao in a box, and turned it around, so the opening was to the wall. He said in case I came back, I could have the-”

Chu Wanning abruptly stood up and walked out of the door.

It brought Mo Ran back to the present, back to the sickening reality of Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi’s pitying looks, the aghast expressions of his family, of four billion dollars, of everything that had happened.

He blinked, and fancied that his ears had popped, like the pressure had changed as he emerged from the depths of memory. “Whatever. Anyway. That’s how I got the money to go to Xiangtan.”

“Shit. I’m so sorry,” Nangong Si said.

“Yeah.” Mo Ran stood up. “I’m gonna – Chu Wanning.”

“I think it’s been a lot for him,” Wang Chuqing said. “All the emotional conversation. He’s not good with that kind of thing, especially when he’s tired and not feeling well. You should give him a few minutes.”

“No, I’ll – I’ll go and make sure. Sorry, to dump all of that.”

“We asked, Ran’er. We’re glad that you shared it.”

Mo Ran wasn't sure if he was; he felt lighter, but his saviour-gege was precious, a shining star amid the dark night of his childhood. And talking about that star had somehow upset his sun.

Chu Wanning had got to the lift before him, so Mo Ran had to traipse all the way up to his room to find him. To his consternation, Chu Wanning had left the door open – had he learnt nothing?! Mo Ran knew that he was upset, but Mo Ran was the one who'd actually lived it-

Then, when he stepped inside, all his irritation vanished.

For a second it was replaced with fear, because he couldn't see Chu Wanning. Then he spotted him, wedged down between the chair and the window, knees tight to his chest. He'd raised his left hand just enough in its sling to bite down on his forearm, and he smacked his right fist against his temple.

"Hey, no, no!" Mo Ran cried out, running forward; he missed the second punch, skidding around the foot of the bed, but caught Chu Wanning's fist for the third. "What are you *doing*?"

He didn't answer, just struggled against Mo Ran's hand. When he couldn't pull free, he hit his head back against the wall instead.

"Stop it!" Mo Ran reached past Chu Wanning's head and placed his hand between it and the wall. "Wanning, *stop!*"

Chu Wanning was sobbing.

Gut-clenching, shoulder-heaving, muscle-tearing sobs; his face was red with them. In everything they'd been through, bomb and suicide and landslides and imprisonment and torture, Mo Ran had never seen him so distressed.

The struggle only lasted for a few seconds, but it felt like an hour to Mo Ran. Then Chu Wanning sagged against his shoulder, collapsing like a puppet with its strings cut, exhausted from whatever frenzy had possessed him.

Mo Ran inched them backwards, holding Chu Wanning close to him. “What was that? Baobei…”

“I’m sorry,” he moaned, “I’m so sorry…”

“For what? Was that…?” That Chu Wanning felt so much pain on his behalf felt like warmth on his skin. “It’s fine. It was a long time ago. Don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry, Mo Ran, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry-”

“Don’t be, don’t be. I got to Xiangtan, didn’t I? It’s all over, it was years ago.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “I’m so embarrassed. So ashamed.”

Mo Ran pressed a kiss to Chu Wanning’s hair. It was damp with sweat. “What on earth do you possibly have to be embarrassed about?”

“I was accused of an affair. You were accused of raping a child. I was locked in a police car for an hour. You were locked in a cellar with a body for- I capitulated. You *fought*. You must think I’m so feeble, so pathetic-”

“Of course I don’t. You’re such an idiot. Wanning, only you could find *not* killing someone as something to be ashamed of. Come on.”

“She kept you as a *slave*-”

“I had friends. I had the girls. Wanning, I’m not forgetting that your asshole of a father locked you up for six months and then *stabbed* you. It’s not a competition, but if it was, it’d be a pretty even fight, wouldn’t it?” He smiled, trying to make it obvious in his voice. “It’s funny, in a way. I mean, dark, gallows humour, but people tried to make both of us take the fall for murders when we were teenagers.”

It didn’t work: Chu Wanning’s sobs renewed. “I became such a *bastard*, I was so cold and awful and uptight, and you went through so much and you’re so- you're so kind, you’re funny and charming and so full of life-”

“No,” Mo Ran said softly. “I’ve been a far worse bastard. I’ve done the most awful… But we’re both here now. It’s all going to be all right now.”

“No. It’s my fault. It’s all my fault, everything you went through – I’m so sorry, Mo Ran, I’m so sorry!”

Were it anyone else in his arms, it would have annoyed Mo Ran. “How can it be your fault? Wanning, that makes no sense. I know you feel responsible for everything on earth, but the world doesn’t revolve around you.”

“Why did I trust him? He was right, I was so gullible – I should have been able to tell he was lying! If I’d been less *fucking stupid* you wouldn’t have gone to Xiangtan in the first place! But I believed him!”

Mo Ran frowned in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“If I’d known you were watching, when I put the bao down- I should have *known* he was lying! I never should have believed him, I should have left him and looked for you!”

The world shifted and the universe cracked.

Mo Ran pulled back, hands gripping Chu Wanning's shoulders, so that he could see his face. "What did you say?"

"It was the studentship interview, for Rufeng. I should have stayed and looked for you, I didn't know, Mo Ran, I didn't know, I'm so sorry-"

A boy who acted like an adult, accompanied by his strict father to a meeting in Linyi.

Mo Ran shook his head. "No."

Chu Wanning shuddered. "I'm so sorry. Mo Ran, I'm so sorry, please-"

"No," he said again.

Mo Ran looked down, and Chu Wanning was staring up at him, face twisted in anguish, but his eyes – Mo Ran knew those eyes, those kind, beautiful eyes, eyes that had seen him and seen him as someone worth comforting and defending.

"Please forgive me," Chu Wanning pleaded. Mo Ran had never seen him weep like this, never heard him beg like this, and he suddenly realised that Chu Wanning thought that he wasn't speaking because he was angry with him.

"For what?" he whispered in wonder. "For saving me?"

Chu Wanning shook his head. "I didn't know. I should have tried to find you, I should have known…"

The world blurred around them – cleared – blurred – cleared as he kissed Chu Wanning's hair, his cheeks, his forehead. All of his pain was washed away, replaced with a kind of holy awe. The world had narrowed down to the beautiful person in front of him, and it was a kind and peaceful world.

“What could you have done? You trusted him. You were a child too. The best, kindest child in the world…” His tears were falling as quickly as Chu Wanning’s. “*Engong-gege.* No. No. God, Wanning,” he said, and both were forms of address.

Chapter 60: The Strid

Chapter Notes

ONE YEAR. SIXTY CHAPTERS. 192,000 WORDS.

That's an average of 1.15 chapters or 3,203 words per week! I hoped for an average of 1 chapter or 3000 words, so I am very happy with that!

If I'd known what a behemoth this was going to become, would I have started it? 😂😅

I may, in my innocence or hubris, have started it, but I would have given up on it dozens of times by now were it not for you all reading it and for your comments, which have all been so kind, so generous, and so funny. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. And especial thanks to those of you who have been reading from the very beginning and commenting so consistently, giving me confidence when I was insecure and motivation when I was exhausted: kaos_sparrow, macthecadillac, JuneSong13, mealtray, eri3UwU, bio_jass, Gawkgawk, summerofspock, and last but not least WaterGoat! 💖 But all of you, especially also those of you who started reading later but commented throughout - you are all fucking amazing. Thank you so much.

To show my heartfelt gratitude, after all the emotions of the last few chapters: A NICE BREAK. 😭 Next chapter, the shit hits the fan.

In the end, they spent a full month in Shanghai. For Chu Wanning, much of it was spent in the clinic. Wu Xiulan and Xiong Huifang, his erstwhile care coordinator and nurse, gave him a vociferous telling-off for not immediately reporting to them, and then began to plan an intensive regimen of medical appointments and therapies, including another ("*Another*, Dr Chu! Do you know how angry Dr Huang is? Aiyo, he's going to give you *such* a scolding for damaging his hard work!") exploratory surgery on his shoulder.

"Who's Dr Huang?" Mo Ran said darkly.

"He's the surgeon who did my scapulectomy," Chu Wanning said, feeling quite touched by the angry protectiveness he fancied he saw on Mo Ran's face. "They're teasing, I think, he's very kind really."

This apparently did nothing to allay Mo Ran's anxiety, as he began to look around for whatever ogre he was imagining.

He wasn't allowed to stay overnight, and during the day he was at meeting after meeting with police, lawyers, and accountants. While Chu Wanning chafed at the confines of his strict bed rest, Mo Ran was receiving a crash course in How to Be a Billionaire, represented by his uncle and accompanied by Xue Meng.

Mo Ran always came in the evening though, for as long as Wu Xiulan allowed him, and Xue Meng often accompanied him.

"Chu-*laoshi*, I've lost so much respect for you since you started going out with this idiot," Xue Meng said. "He didn't even know the difference between stocks and shares today."

Chu Wanning frowned, but he couldn't help but smile as well. Even a year ago, Xue Meng would have probably been utterly unbearable in the wake of such momentous news of his teacher being in a gay relationship, never minding that it was with his cousin who had unintentionally achieved his own dream of becoming richer than sin.

"I remember when I explained the difference between them to you."

"When I was fifteen! Not twenty-five! There's a huge difference."

"I had to explain the difference between powerlifting and weightlifting to you a few months ago," Mo Ran said, reaching over Chu Wanning's legs to squeeze Xue Meng's bicep.

"Fuck off! You have the muscles where I have the mind, clearly."

"That's what I needed," Mo Ran said haughtily. "To save my baobei."

Xue Meng and Chu Wanning groaned in unison.

“Xue Meng, I’m not allowed to move my arm, push him off the bed.”

“Try, Mengmeng!”

“You need to use physics,” Chu Wanning said, laughing as Xue Meng tried to obey his order. “Unbalance him!”

“What’s going on in here?” Xiong Huifang marched into the room. “Are you disturbing Dr Chu? I’ll throw you out!”

“No, no,” Chu Wanning said, holding up his right hand. “It’s fine.”

“It’s lights out in five minutes anyway,” she said with narrowed eyes.

“All right, we surrender. Xue Meng, may I…?”

“Urgh.” Xue Meng rolled his eyes performatively and went to the door. “I’ll wait in the car.”

“Thank you. Five minutes.”

Mo Ran waited until Xue Meng was out the door before he gave Chu Wanning a long, proper kiss. “How are you?”

“All right. They’ve finally let me have a tablet, so I’ve been catching up on the fallout. What about you?”

“Urgh. Okay. I hate the money stuff,” Mo Ran said. “My uncle’s still refusing to take it.”

“And he’ll continue to do so.”

“He’s good at this kind of stuff! He’ll know what to do with it.”

“And he wants you to learn. Wasn’t that why you went down to Liangshan? To learn the work?”

“That was different. That was actually *work*, not… Talking about money going back and forth.”

“The money’s a tool, Mo Ran. Think of how much of the work in the lab was just ensuring everything was working well.” Chu Wanning played with Mo Ran’s hand, turning it up and down, marvelling at his fingers. “Hm. Have you ever read Kurt Vonnegut?”

Mo Ran smiled affectionately. “Shizun always has such optimism. If your question begins with ‘Have you read-?’, you can generally assume the answer is ‘No’.”

Chu Wanning nudged him with his foot. “You’ll surprise me, one day. He was an American author. You might have heard of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but in 1990 he wrote a novel called *Hocus Pocus*. In it, he writes, ‘Another flaw in the human character is that everybody wants to build and nobody wants to do maintenance.’ I’ve found it to be true. Most billionaire investors want something new, something that can add to their legacy, something they can put their name on. Maintenance doesn’t fuel the ego in the same way. But it is more necessary. Start small, start local, in Sisheng and Wuchang, like your uncle did. Then you won’t be paralysed by the task being overwhelming. Instead you’ll be able to see its effects right in front of you. Limitation is the mother of creativity – Stravinsky knew that. The accountants and the lawyers are your lab technicians, making sure all the tools and machines are safe to use.”

“Shizun is the smartest person in the world,” Mo Ran said, with an amused, indulgent smile. “And the sexiest…” His hand began to tug the cover down.

“No!” Chu Wanning said, blushing furiously, grinning.

“Come onnn, it’ll be fine…”

“Xue Meng is waiting for you. And Xiong Huifang will be in to throw you out any second.”

“Doesn’t that make it hotter though?” Mo Ran said wickedly.

Chu Wanning laughed and pushed his chest. “*No*. But I can leave tomorrow, and then I just need a check-up before we go back to Sichuan.”

“Yes! Okay, message received, tomorrow night,” Mo Ran said, making Chu Wanning laugh again – how was he now the kind of person who *laughed?* – and gave him a long, lingering kiss. “Sleep well. Dream of me, baobei.”

“You want me to have nightmares? Then I’ll be too tired to do anything tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, when it came about, was the 8th of December.

A year ago, his trivia calendar had informed it that it was the day of the Immaculate Conception, the date of the Battle of Canhe Slope in 385, the birthday of Wang Anshi and the deathday of John Lennon. Chu Wanning personally knew it as the day that his favourite poet Du Fu had returned to the imperial court in Chang’an, the day that the Galileo probe flew past Earth in 1990 and 1992, and more recently, the day of China’s first confirmed COVID-19 case.

That afternoon, Shi Mingjing had pushed him against the whiteboard and stolen his first kiss.

That memory still made his skin crawl and his stomach turn with revulsion, but time had soothed his spirit a little. After all, if Shi Mingjing hadn’t been so egregious, Chu Wanning would never have sent him to another lab or another supervisor. Mo Ran would have

continued to moon after him instead. He'd have never become so lonely or so desperate that his eyes turned to Chu Wanning, and they would never have had this.

So a small part of him had to be grateful to Shi Mingjing. Because Mo Ran was worth all the pains of the past year, he thought as the taxi took them from the clinic to the Peninsula Hotel.

Across the Huangpu River, the magenta orbs of the Pearl Tower shone golden-pink in the light of the setting sun. Chu Wanning felt as though he could die as he checked into 'his room' – a fig leaf that cost the best part of three thousand yuan a night, given that he and Mo Ran only intended to share the one bed between them. He could afford it, at least for a couple of nights – normally he'd never pay over eight hundred – but he was conscious that he and Ye Wangxi were the only members of their strange party whose financial status didn't contain the suffix '-naire'.

The bathroom, however… Well. He had to admit the bathroom was quite nice.

As he brushed his teeth, he took in the damage around his neck: a visible red line of new skin, to be treated with yet more Dermatix twice a day. But the line of the ligature was high, mostly hidden in the shadow of his jaw, and at the clinic they said that it would be invisible within a year or two. The lines around his wrists had healed, and the bruises had vanished. He should buy a scarf, he thought, and then no one would notice.

He emerged from the bathroom to see Mo Ran staring down out of the window. Chu Wanning crept up behind Mo Ran and shyly slid an arm around his waist. "What are you looking at?"

"There's a German Christmas Market on the Bund," Mo Ran said, looking down at the crowds and the lights.

"Hm. Is it good?"

"Ah, I don't know. The others went to it a few days ago and they said it was."

“You didn’t want to go with them?”

“I came over to the clinic instead.”

Chu Wanning frowned. Mo Ran was being carefully neutral, but he had a sinking feeling that… “Would you like to go?”

“It’s very crowded.”

“That wasn’t a ‘No’.” Chu Wanning rested his cheek against Mo Ran’s shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Mo Ran looked down at him in surprise. “I didn’t really think it’d be your kind of thing.”

“Well… There were lots of things that I didn’t think were ‘my kind of thing’ that you’ve opened my eyes too,” Chu Wanning replied, ears burning.

This made Mo Ran laugh. “Really? You’ll really go with me?”

“Of course. You came with me to Linyi.”

He laughed again. “Hopefully it won’t be that bad! The hotel’s giving out VIP passes to the guests, to make up for it being right outside, so we won’t even have to wait in the queue.”

It was a good thing they had the passes, because Chu Wanning might have had to go back on his word if they’d had to queue for over an hour before they even entered the market. The crowd was so dense that moving through it was difficult, but it meant that no one could see that amid the press, they dared to hold hands in public.

A huge fir tree, hung with thousands of lights and baubles of red and gold, was the centre of the market, along with a carousel bedecked with human-sized statues of the Nutcracker. Chu Wanning explained these to Mo Ran, and gave a precis of the Nativity story once they came across the large stable. Actors dressed as the characters cheerfully answered questions about their roles in the story, while the woman playing Mary bounced a fat two-year old on her lap.

"I feel sorry for her if that's the size of her newborn," Chu Wanning remarked, and Mo Ran's laugh rang out over the crowd.

It was like walking with an extremely handsome furnace-cum-periscope. Mo Ran towered over most of the crowd, and was able to point out where they should go next. Mo Ran chose a Currywurst with Reibekuchen, complaining that it wasn't even spicy, while Chu Wanning treated himself to traditional German churros with powdered sugar and Nutella.

Loudspeakers everywhere blared either carols or English Christmas pop songs. Chu Wanning knew some of these from his time in England, but a lot of them were new to Mo Ran, or familiar only in snatches from adverts.

Chu Wanning nibbled on the nuts and biscuits that coated his caramel apple. He'd managed two hours, and his nerves were beginning to wear, but when he looked up and saw the joy and excitement on Mo Ran's face, he became determined to weather the next one.

"Let's go to the stalls," he said.

"Yes!" Mo Ran beamed down at him. "You've got my new number, in case we get separated?"

Chu Wanning wanted to ask why they might be separated, but it was a sensible precaution. "Mm. And if we can't find each other, we can meet in the hotel."

"Good call. They've got little glass lanterns there, can we go there first?"

Chu Wanning saw Mo Ran's eyes light up at a stained-glass lamp in the shape of a pagoda. He waited until Mo Ran had moved onto the next stall, then swiftly haggled it down to a reasonable price. He was going to get rid of all his candles and incense, after all, but overhead lights gave him a headache – he'd have to invest in a few more lamps.

There were stalls selling the expected Christmas ornaments and reindeer antlers, but several craft ones from Europe and even some selling carpets and embroidery from India. Chu Wanning lingered over a stall selling Bohemian crystal vases and another selling gingerbread, but walked past one selling hand-poured candles. He eventually bought a large blue morpho butterfly in a glass case, as large as his two hands together. He had a soft spot for butterflies now. Ridiculous.

When he turned around with his new butterfly, he couldn't see Mo Ran anywhere – worrying, given his height. Then, just as he was about to call him, he appeared at his side with a proud smile and a parcel.

"What's that?" Chu Wanning asked.

"A surprise. How are you doing? Ready to go back in?"

"Mn." He was swiftly reaching the end of his ability to endure the crowd and the blaring music, and they had been lucky to avoid being recognised so far. "What about you, do you want to spend a little longer?"

"No, I'm fine. It closes at ten, anyway." Mo Ran smiled down at him, and Chu Wanning couldn't help but notice how beautiful he was in this light, shadows pooling in his dimples, fairy lights sparkling in his eyes. "Thank you for tolerating it for me."

"It wasn't tolerance. I liked it."

Mo Ran's beam widened. "You did?"

“Mn. Especially the churros. I wonder which came first, them or youtiao.”

“Definitely youtiao. They stole it from us.”

Chu Wanning smiled and readily took on the role of devil’s advocate; the playful argument carried them out of the market and back up to Mo Ran’s room.

“Would you mind if I had a bath?” Chu Wanning asked. The bathtub was the deepest he’d ever seen.

“Go for it. Do you want a beer?”

“Hm – is there wine?” They’d drunk Kirschwein in the market.

“Ah, yes, sure.”

While the bath ran, Chu Wanning read the labels on the toiletries. Apparently the Peninsula Hotel had a different scent for each location, and Shanghai’s was geranium, patchouli, and grapefruit. It wasn’t his favourite combination, but he added it to the water, and once the initial citrus faded a little it became pleasantly woody instead.

The heat of the water was like a physical embrace, thawing all the tension from his muscles.

They’d survived it.

The day after tomorrow they’d be flying back to Chengdu, Chu Wanning with great reluctance, arriving as early as possible before driving back to Wuchang together. Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi had an invitation to spend Lunar New Year in Sichuan. Mo Ran and Xue Zhengyong were going to create a plan for Nangong Liu’s money, Xue Meng was going to knuckle down on his project, Chu Wanning was going to write his next book.

They'd survived.

Chu Wanning swallowed a mouthful of wine, far drier than the Kirschwein, and rubbed his eyes. They'd survived.

Hope was a strange, uncomfortable feeling. It felt like the first month of a *penzai*'s life, when most plants were lost, and its environment had to be assiduously cared for. It was much the same way that Mo Ran had treated him over the last month, since he had cradled him through his meltdown and the exhaustion that followed it, worshipping him with kisses until even Chu Wanning's guilt faded into the background.

And underneath the hope… There was something else. Not certainty, not so solid as that. It was like the soil around the plant, supporting it.

The thing made him think that if he were to emerge from this bathtub, and go into the next room, Mo Ran would not reject him.

The thing wasn't hope, nor was it expectation. It was… confidence.

The realisation nearly unmoored him. He associated confidence with knowledge of competence; he knew that he could perform a calculation, play a qin piece, fix a tool. He could rely on himself.

But this confidence, if that's what it was… It didn't rely on Chu Wanning. It rested on Mo Ran, and on the bond between them.

Was it less confidence and more… faith? Was that the distinction?

He and Nangong Xu were similar in several respects, and one was the scientific urge to test a hypothesis. It was like an itch that begged to be scratched, more powerful than the fear of

rejection or humiliation.

And beneath that… Beneath that thought, something thrummed in him. It was less like electricity under his skin, and more like magnetism. He needed to be closer to Mo Ran. Even such a small separation made his chest ache, but the thought of moving towards him made his body light, even as the heat of the water around his penis made him increasingly aware of his pulse.

He didn't look in the mirror when he climbed up out of the bath; in fact, he carefully avoided looking anywhere near it. If he caught sight of his unsightly body and unpleasant face, he'd lose all his courage. He wrapped the towel around his hips – his skin was so sensitive that he felt as though he could feel each individual thread, and the feeling of the cotton rubbing against his penis sent a jolt up through his spine. He resisted the desire to chase the sensation.

The lights were kindly dim, just bedside lamps, which he hoped would veil at least some of the horror of his back. His heart was hammering in his ears. Chu Wanning almost thought that he could hear the hornet-buzz of syncopation as he walked towards the bed.

Mo Ran turned the television off as soon as he came out, and sat up. "Ah, right – got the Cica-care sheets?"

Chu Wanning nearly faltered. The sweetness in his mouth was sour. Who was he kidding? Did he really expect that just walking out in a towel would be enough to *seduce* someone as good-looking and experienced as Mo Ran? That the sight of his scarred, skinny body would inspire lust? He'd let Mo Ran's kindness to him rot his brain, cause utter delusion.

He shook his head.

Mo Ran watched him as he walked across the room with a strange expression, focused but carefully neutral.

Chu Wanning touched his belt buckle with trembling hands. He looked up to see Mo Ran's reaction.

Black eyes stared back at him. Sparks of reflected light flickered as Mo Ran blinked.

In those eyes, Chu Wanning saw his own face: pale, bony, ugly. His fingers paused on the strap. What the hell was he thinking? He'd only touched his belt buckle, hadn't he? His hand hadn't gone lower – he hadn't done what Shi Minjing had done to him, had he?

Mo Ran lowered his chin, casting his eyes into shadow; they bore into him, as black as a starless night.

Chu Wanning wasn't very good at reading expressions. But the sight of Mo Ran's face kindled something akin to fear in him.

When he'd lived in England, he'd spent a holiday travelling around the north, visiting Brontë Country and the Yorkshire Dales. The Strid looked like a small hill-stream, but it was known as the most deadly stretch of water in the world, where the wide River Wharfe was forced to run through a gap so small the unwary could be tempted to leap across it. Every single person who had ever braved it had died; its harmless appearance hid seventy metres of violent currents and dark caves to trap and crush and drown any living thing.

It was that place of black rocks and rushing water that he thought of when he looked into Mo Ran's eyes. Something dark and hungry lurking under a placid gaze, waiting for him to leap.

He lifted his chin, and raised an eyebrow.

Mo Ran hooked his arms under Chu Wanning's legs and threw him onto the bed; Chu Wanning could do nothing but give an undignified yelp of surprise, cut off by Mo Ran's demanding kiss. It tasted of Kirschwein. His teeth raked across the sensitive skin of Chu Wanning's throat and his hand tore away the towel around his hips; the drag of harsh cotton followed but a sudden chill air and then the rough denim of Mo Ran's fly was enough to send him insane.

Mo Ran wasn't undressing though. He kissed down Chu Wanning's neck, his chest, his abdomen and his naval, and Chu Wanning realised with a sudden horrified thrill that he wasn't stopping. His penis jumped at the heat of Mo Ran's breath.

"Wait! Stop!"

Mo Ran froze, and looked up the length of Chu Wanning's body. "No?" he growled.

"It's dirty..."

Mo Ran's face hardened. His voice was ragged as he spoke: "How is it dirty? *Nothing* about you is dirty."

"But I… How could you want-?" He didn't know if he could reciprocate; Chu Wanning barely even *touched* himself, and Mo Ran was willing to-

He was shocked out of his spiral of panic by Mo Ran gently kissing the slit of his foreskin, and he went blind with the violent pleasure of it.

"I want to. I'm desperate to. I love you, I want to make you feel good… Please let me. Trust me."

Mo Ran suddenly touched his testicles, and they tightened – Chu Wanning felt as though he was going insane, but whatever noise he made must have communicated assent, because Mo Ran made a sound of delight and then took his penis in his mouth. The wet heat, the softness, the suction and the stimulation: it drove him mad, pushed him outside the realms of conscious thought. This was so far beyond the few handjobs they had shared – this was a different world of pleasure, and Chu Wanning nearly thrashed in the grip of it.

He choked back a sob; he was now passingly familiar with the sensation of an orgasm, and he could feel it building. "Mo Ran- I- Going- Mo-!"

Mo Ran didn't stop, and inexperienced as he was, Chu Wanning couldn't restrain himself – the throbbing release was torn out of him with a sob.

He barely noticed Mo Ran swallowing before his mind went completely blank. He felt as though he was floating, and as though he was made of lead. Muscles twitched, in his face and his groin and the back of his neck.

Mo Ran kissed his navel and smiled languidly up at him. "I love you so much."

His eyes prickled with new tears. "Mo Ran…"

Mo Ran made to lie on the bed, and Chu Wanning managed to shake his head. "No." He gestured up and down Mo Ran's body.

"What is it, baobei?"

"Clothes."

Mo Ran chuckled, and stripped with practised speed; he lay down along Chu Wanning's body, hot and firm, and wrapped his arms around him. "Mmm."

"I want…"

"Mm? Whatever you want."

"You to… Inside," Chu Wanning said helplessly. He buried his face in the crook of Mo Ran's neck to hide his blushing, as though they hadn't just done something so exhilaratingly filthy.

Mo Ran blinked. “You mean… It’ll hurt.”

“Don’t care.” He remembered what Mo Ran had said before. His mouth had been pleasurable, but so far away from Chu Wanning's own; the distance had evoked a strange grief in his chest. He needed to be *closer*. “Need it.”

Mo Ran’s eyes became softer, and he kissed his temple. Peeking down their entwined bodies, Chu Wanning could see Mo Ran’s own penis growing erect, and even in the post-orgasmic bliss he nearly changed his mind. The sheer size of it would kill him. But dying impaled on Mo Ran, surrounding him, pressed against him… there were far worse ways to die.

“Need it,” he confirmed. “Need you. Mo Ran…” he whispered. “I love you.”

Chapter 61: Cold Scales and Sacred Hands

It could not have been waterboarded out of him, but Chu Wanning was extremely relieved that they had one more day in Shanghai before flying back to Chengdu. Sitting still for three hours the next day would have been… uncomfortable.

Instead he had a day to recover, and it was one of the most blissful of his life, despite the new soreness. He wondered if it was something that all lovers did, studying their beloved's face and hands and arms and chests, making nonsensical noises and talking about nothing. In any other place, with any other person, any of this would be irritating, unpleasant, off-putting. But with Mo Ran… It felt as though they were discovering an entirely new plane of existence together, as though they'd ascended, and were connoisseurs of a novel, secret pleasure in the gardens of Mount Penglai.

It was a memory he needed to allow him to endure the airports, the plane, the long drive from Chengdu to Wuchang. He knew he'd been neglecting Xue Meng, so he sat next to him for both the flight and the drive, talking about the robotics competition, Rufeng, the plans for the next semester. Chu Wanning was glad that he did it, and knew that, ironically, without Nangong Xu and the Rufeng ordeal, his new relationship with Mo Ran would have placed a far greater strain on his relationship with Xue Meng. It was important to show him that he was still the same Chu Wanning, only now, perhaps… gay?

And happier.

So, important to do, but also exhausting, particularly on top of enduring the journey. By the time the Xues dropped him and Mo Ran at Chu Wanning's flat (Xue Meng glaring out of the window), he could do nothing other than collapse into bed and sleep.

In the morning, they had sex again. Mo Ran had guided him in how to use his thighs instead, which they both enjoyed, if not quite to the same degree. But Chu Wanning was learning that sometimes the act was less about physical pleasure, and more about touch. Of course he intellectually knew about oxytocin and dopamine being released during sex, but it was something else to experience it. All the pain in his body faded away, and his nerves were finally quiet in the aftermath of it.

And Mo Ran… it soothed his soul, to see how happy it made Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning was the one who made his eyes crinkle, his cheeks dimple. Who made him laugh and gasp and moan, sag against his good shoulder and exhale against his skin.

Every time, it felt like Tianwen-1 touching down – too apt, maybe, thinking of something shining and golden meeting something scarred and pitted and alien and barren. But something extraordinary, for all that. Chu Wanning had done that, and if he had achieved such a beautiful and perfect thing, maybe there was a reason for his life after all. Maybe he wasn't just a stain on the Earth.

Maybe… there was something good in *him* as well.

"Unnnhhhh." Mo Ran nuzzled his face against Chu Wanning's hair. "Don't want to get out of bed…"

"Don't, then," Chu Wanning replied. "It's cold outside. Warm here."

"Who are you," Mo Ran said, punctuating his words with kisses, "and what have you done with Chu Wanning? Encouraging me to shirk my duties…"

"Your duty is here. With me."

He made a pleased noise. "One of my duties. Another of my duties is keeping you fed and healthy. I also need to check my flat. Hopefully it's not burnt down or…"

Chu Wanning kissed his collar bone. "All right. I suppose I ought to shower. E-mails. Xinhua keeps asking for interviews and comments. I need to draft a proper letter and tell them where to go."

“Maybe you should think about it,” Mo Ran suggested gently. “If they think rehabilitating you will cast them in a better light, let them.”

Chu Wanning groaned and hid his face. “I’ll *read* them,” he graciously conceded. “I really ought to have read all the evidence by now.”

“I’ve been distracting you. Let me make it up to you. I want to cook a proper meal for us. I’ll unpack and wash all of this, and then this evening I’ll bring some of my kitchen stuff over. What would you like?”

“Hm. What term are we in now? Daxue – so ginger, garlic, sesame, yam, mutton.”

“Mutton? Lamb’s more tender.”

“More expensive too.”

“I think I can afford it,” Mo Ran said with a grin, and received a light slap on the chest from Chu Wanning in return.

“See? Wealth corrupts. Already complacent and spendthrift. Extravagant. Prodigal.”

Unfortunately, eventually, Mo Ran had to leave, and Chu Wanning made himself a hypocrite by being extravagant and prodigal with the hot water. A month without the heating on had left the flat feeling like the inside of a fridge.

Before he’d gone into the shower he’d set his computer to downloading all the evidence files. He sat down, hair wrapped in a towel, and got to work in making sense of it all.

It was such a relief to be able to pad around his own flat barefoot again, wearing a decade-old threadbare t-shirt, a jumper bearing the faded arrowhead and laurels of CNSA, and tai chi trousers, all perfectly soft after hundreds of washes.

Massages and physiotherapy, or nice meals at fancy restaurants – they were all well and good, but nothing was as healing as microwave rice and frozen vegetables, with the seaweed and dried prawns that everyone in Sichuan loathed, eaten sitting cross-legged at the computer. He didn't have to worry about how he was perceived, whether anyone saw him chewing the ends of his chopsticks or disliked the music he was listening to, whether he unconsciously hummed or repeated words as he read them, or stretched his fingers or bounced his leg. He could simply exist, roleless and nameless – an animal, not Yuheng or Chu-*laoshi* or the Beidou Immortal.

Just as he was thinking this, the door intercom rang.

Chu Wanning frowned. Mo Ran wasn't due back for several hours – he respected Chu Wanning's need for a little solitude – and besides, Chu Wanning had given him a set of keys.

"Hello?"

"Oh, Chu-*laoshi*! It's so good to hear your voice, I've been so worried. It's Hua Binan."

Chu Wanning managed not to audibly sigh. "Ah, hello. Um. Did you want to meet about something?"

"If you wouldn't mind. Could I please come up? It's a little delicate, or I'd have invited you for tea."

The temptation was almost visible in front of him, to say that he did not allow students into his flat. But Mo Ran had trampled that boundary to dust, and Hua Binan was – like Mo Ran – a former student besides. What had Mo Ran said in Yuliang?

"I used to think that you weren't… That you didn't act like other supervisors because you were arrogant. And then you always said that us going to dinner or hanging out would be inappropriate, and I thought you were just making up rules because you didn't want to."

He didn’t want to be that. To be what Mo Ran had used to think he was, when he hated him.

“Mn. I’m buzzing you in.”

He pulled off his makeshift turban, gave his hair a brisk rub, and then tossed the towel in the vague direction of the laundry basket. It was typical of Hua Binan, appearing when and where he wasn’t wanted...

Chu Wanning sharply chided himself for such an uncharitable thought. By the time Hua Binan had climbed the stairs, he had managed to slot a more civilised mask into place.

“Hi,” Hua Binan said, with one of his beautiful smiles, “I’m so sorry to disturb unannounced. I bought tea, in the absence of buying it for you in a café.”

Chu Wanning looked down at the cake in Hua Binan’s hands, and raised his eyebrows as he took in the cheap-looking paper wrapper. “Yellow Mark Pu’erh? That’s very generous of you.”

“I know you like pu’erh in the winter. And I recently came into some money,” Hua Binan said as he stepped inside Chu Wanning’s flat for the first time. “Shall I make some?”

Purple lights and the sensation of ice flashed through his head. “Please, let me,” Chu Wanning said. “I enjoy the ritual, and a tea like this deserves the proper gongfu set. Make yourself at home.”

Horribly, Hua Binan did, examining the bookshelves and the penzai and even touching his guqin. Chu Wanning brought out his Yixing gongfu set, as befitting pu’erh tea, and boiled the water. They talked as he prepared it, Chu Wanning telling him the sanitised version of what had happened in Rufeng. He had recounted it enough times now that the script had been written, and he could recite it without too much thought or emotion.

The tea was beautiful, smooth and sweet: a perfect reddish colour that made Chu Wanning first think of Aerospace Orange and then of coral. There were notes of plum and wood and herbs in the first brewing, and they both drank and appreciated it in silence.

"That really is…" Hua Binan said as he put his empty cup down, and Chu Wanning felt a twist of guilt.

"It was very kind of you to bring it," Chu Wanning replied as he poured out two more cups' worth. "Is there a special occasion? You said there was something delicate you wanted to discuss…"

Shi Mingjing, he suddenly thought. Heavens – had Shi Mingjing done something to Hua Binan? After all, he was… he had…

And Chu Wanning had thrust him into the sphere of someone as good-looking and gentle-mannered as Hua Binan. If Shi Mingjing had made a move on him, let alone anything worse, Chu Wanning would be responsible.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Has anything happened?"

"Oh, no! No, no, no. Well, a lot has happened, but I'm perfectly fine. Better than I've been in a very long time, actually."

As confusing as this was, at least it was nothing to do with Shi Mingjing. Chu Wanning drank another mouthful of tea to steady his nerves. "That's excellent, but… Hua Binan, I don't understand – what is the delicate matter?"

Hua Binan gave him a smile, as soft as a petal. "You can call me Binan, you know. I would like that."

"Ahh…" To hide how awkward this made him feel, Chu Wanning finished the cup of tea; it scalded his tongue, but he still poured another, to give himself an excuse not to make eye

contact. “That was the delicate matter…?”

“No. Hm… I confess, I don’t quite know where to begin. There’s so much I need to tell you…” Hua Binan blinked at him slowly. “What did you think of Mu Huohan?”

“The… the judge?” He had the strange feeling that he’d missed five minutes of conversation; he couldn’t follow Hua Binan’s train of thought. “Well, I’ve met him before, actually. He was the judge in my criminal trial, the one whose ruling was overturned by the Supreme People’s Court.”

“I know. You accused him of corruption, for letting Guyueye off with a slap on the wrist.” Hua Binan laughed.

“Not my finest hour.”

“What are you talking about? It was magnificent. And all true.”

“True it might have been, but it wasn’t the correct situation. My lawyer scolded me frightfully, as he had every right to. I ought to have written a letter, and instead I let my temper get the better of me.”

“You said that Wan Jinhai could have served in Unit 731, experimenting on innocent women and children for power and profit, and that Mu Huohan was just like Douglas MacArthur, offering immunity in return for the state being given access to data from human experimentation. I’d never seen him so angry.”

He had said that, hadn’t he? Chu Wanning’s ears burnt. “I lost my temper. He was right to hold me in contempt of court; no matter how accurate, one can’t speak like that to a judge.”

“No, no! It was the best thing I’d ever heard.” Hua Binan’s eyes were shining. “He deserved no respect, and you gave him none. And at the same time, I could tell that you really *believed* it. You knew about the scandal and the settlements, you’d researched it and followed it for

years – of course I found out later about Hong Kong, and that conference, when you were just sixteen – and you knew that it was wrong. You were so passionate… you cared. You really, truly *cared*."

"Of course I cared," Chu Wanning said, but his mind was turning over something else. Something Hua Binan had said…

"No. Most people don't. They *say* they care, but if they don't know a person who's actually been affected, it's just intellectual to them. That's what you don't understand," Hua Binan said. "What it felt like, to see that. You were *so angry*... And not for yourself. You were the one being hounded and accused and made into an example, but the time that you were really, truly angry wasn't when you were testifying about yourself. It was when you were talking about the Guyueye experiments."

The embers of an old suspicion flared to life. "You have Butterfly Bone Syndrome."

Hua Binan raised his eyebrows. "Did you not know?"

"No. I must confess that I suspected, when we first met. You certainly fit the stereotype, but I try not put any weight on them. A scientist should be aware of bias."

Hua Binan's smile shifted a little. It deepened, and the muscles around his eyes moved, but Chu Wanning had trouble reading his expression. "When you mention the stereotype, do you mean the belief that all Butterfly Bones are good-looking?" He leant forward. "You think I'm good-looking, Chu Wanning?"

Chu Wanning leant back; for a brief second, Hua Binan's face made him think of Shi Mingjing's, looming over him.

"Of course," he said, perturbed. "You're very good-looking…" Nothing like Mo Ran, of course, but no one could call Hua Binan ugly. "Your face is symmetrical, your eyes are large, you have good skin and a pleasant bone structure."

Hua Binan laughed, his eyes crinkling. “A lot of people have called me good-looking, but it never meant as much as it does coming from you. Even if your words are a little technical.”

Chu Wanning stood up; there were pins and needles in his legs, and he stumbled a little. “Hua Binan, I don’t understand what- Why are you here?”

“I’m getting to it, I promise. Please, sit down. Have another cup,” Hua Binan said, pouring out another pair. He waited for Chu Wanning to sit down again before he passed him his cup, and sipped from his own. “I’m sorry. You distracted me.”

Hua Binan always managed to unsteady him. But the Hua Binan of this conversation was different, somehow. He had barely stopped smiling in the whole time they had been talking. Usually Hua Binan kept everything shut tight behind his docile expression, but today he was speaking with more passion than Chu Wanning had ever heard.

“But… Why work for Guyueye? If you have BBS, if you *agreed* with me, then why on earth would you go to work for them?”

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” Hua Binan said. “Disappointing you. Agreeing with every word you said about them, and pretending the money was more important to me. Well – ahhh. It was, in a sense. But not money for me. Money for everyone with BBS. The money they, we, *deserve*. Not enough, no amount can ever be enough, but *something*.”

“You went to Guyueye to help them receive…” Hua Binan was handing him the pieces to assemble, and his brain felt full to bursting. “Nangong Xu had a colleague in Guyueye – he needed someone on the inside, to install his software, to steal the compensation money…”

Hua Binan’s beam widened. “And to use their equipment to manufacture drugs. I specialised in counterfeit medicine, but plenty of the more illicit varieties as well. That’s where most of their money came from. I was outside of their official hierarchy so he called me 'Cold Scales', which I suppose is better than a number.”

A colleague, for whom he murdered… “*’I’d never seen him so angry’*... You’d been watching Mu Huohan’s trials.”

The Giant Molecular Cloud of information collapsed into a protostar of understanding.

"Your mother was Hua Gui," Chu Wanning breathed. "Mu Huohan was your father."

Hua Binan's smile was proud and delighted. "I knew you'd work it out."

"You're the son who saw her murder."

"Correct again. I'm also the person who made Nangong Xu promise not to kill you. I'd never do anything to hurt you." Hua Binan's eyes darted to the red line around Chu Wanning's neck. "I never dreamt he'd do something like that to you. If he was still alive, I'd kill him."

Without moving his eyes, Chu Wanning tried to locate his phone. It wasn't in his pocket. Had he put it down on the kitchen counter, when he was boiling the kettle?

Despite his efforts, Hua Binan seemed to read his mind. "Oh, no, don't *worry!* Like I said. I'd never hurt you. Don't you understand?"

Hua Binan reached out, and took Chu Wanning's hand. "I *love* you."

Chapter 62: Mountains of Knives, Seas of Fire

Chapter Notes

> Ahhhh, hello! Thank you so, so much for your comments last chapter!
>
> Work is very busy, and I am not very well. I really enjoy replying to our comments, but it takes me a long time, and I knew that if I did then it would be another couple of weeks before the next chapter was up. So I will reply now, and thank you for your patience!
>
> From now on, the individual chapters will be 'Choose Not to Warn'. The general warnings for rape and violence apply for several chapters. Things are going to be very bad for a while.

Chu Wanning violently recoiled and pulled his hand out of Hua Binan's skin-crawling, hair-raising grasp.

He repressed the urge to slap Hua Binan, or to run. He needed more of a head-start.

"Hua Binan," he began.

"Binan. Please."

"Hua Binan," Chu Wanning said again. He felt the sensation of walking on a tightrope; not to give Hua Binan false hope, but not to upset him either. "I'm… I'm overwhelmed."

"I know it's a lot to take in."

Chu Wanning nodded desperately. "Exactly. And I… it sometimes takes me a while. To think things through. Please, may I ask you to leave? And I can give you a proper answer tomorrow."

Hua Binan's smile faded. "Ah. I'm afraid that might be difficult…"

"I have no intention of calling the police. You know my thoughts on them. But I need to-" His heart was racing. "I need to be alone, I think."

"Wanning. You're such a terrible liar," Hua Binan said indulgently. "Of course you'd call the police."

His spinal fluid froze. Hua Binan's eyes were like a still lake on a starless night. Was this a confession before a murder-suicide? Did he want a witness, like his colleague Nangong Xu? "Are you here to kill me?" he asked.

Hua Binan frowned. "I *told* you. I have no intention of hurting you. Please listen to me. It's hurtful of you to keep making me repeat myself."

It would be sensible to apologise, but Hua Binan's words were like needles through his paper-thin face. "It's hurtful to learn that my student was working for years with a man who hanged me," he said.

"He did that on his own."

"But you *knew* him! You worked with him. You asked him to kill your father, and you knew that he'd not make it a quick death. He was the textbook definition of a sadist. He *enjoyed* torture."

Hua Binan cocked his head to the side. "Don't you think that in some certain, very specific circumstances, it's allowable to enjoy torture?"

Chu Wanning couldn't hide his horror. "*No*."

“Not even of a man that raped and murdered your mother? If you’d had a mother, you’d know what it feels like, to see that.”

Chu Wanning bit his tongue, hard. “I had a mother.”

“Not one who wanted you. Who loved you. That’s the difference.” Hua Binan smiled benevolently. “I understand why you can’t understand what it feels like. To see her screaming in pain. To see her lifeless body.”

“And how many other mothers died for your revenge? You said it yourself. *If they don’t know a person who’s actually been affected, it’s just intellectual to them*. Hua Binan, you destroyed lives! Killed in gang feuds, lost in addiction – how many? How many children, forced to smuggle drugs across province lines, who ended up dead or imprisoned?”

“Ahh… I see,” Hua Binan said. He was no longer smiling. “In this case, your righteous anger isn’t quite so disinterested. Much more banal. You’re angry because of Mo Ran.”

Chu Wanning resisted the desire to stretch his fingers. “It’s not the only reason, but yes. I am.”

“Because you love him.”

Chu Wanning raised his chin.

“You shouldn’t, you know. He doesn’t love you.”

Sense fell by the wayside; anger sparked in him, welcome in its purifying fire. “Get the hell out.”

“Hmm.” Hua Binan visibly assessed him. “No. I don’t think I will.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I also don’t want you to hurt me.” Hua Binan showed his teeth in a grin. “I have such brittle bones, after all. But you are welcome to try.”

The cold of fear flashed across Chu Wanning’s skin. He looked down at his hand, and lifted it.

Or tried to.

“What have you-” His feet refused to respond to him; he could move his arms, at little, but when he tried to strike Hua Binan with his elbow it was weak and clumsy and slow, and easily knocked away.

“But… The tea.” Not again. *Not again not again notagainnotagain*- “You drank it too!”

“I did. But I ate a very large amount of activated charcoal right before I came up,” Hua Binan said. “It was a lot of effort; I had to buy an antique cake-mould just to put it back into the correct shape afterwards. I knew you’d notice that kind of thing. I’ll probably need to sleep on the drive, but it’ll just be a little fatigue and numbness rather than… well.”

Chu Wanning tried to push himself up from the sofa, aiming to lurch towards his phone, but Hua Binan pulled him back with one hand.

“Let go of me! Don’t touch me!”

“I hoped that there was a chance you might return my feelings, but I learnt from my younger brother’s mistake. You’re not fickle, and you’re quite obsessed with that bastard Mo Ran. So I prepared for the eventuality that you might not want to come with me willingly. You’ll understand and forgive me, eventually. We have the rest of our lives.”

He was going to be sick. Horror like bile scorched the back of his throat.

"Ah, but… We need to wait here until your neighbour comes back. We have to put on a show for her. But if you shout out to her, or don't play along… Then we won't need her to be a witness. And the men I've had to hire at very great expense tend to have just one way of clearing up after themselves."

Zhang Xinyi, usually back from playing xianqi in the park in the early afternoon for a nap. They had been watching his flat, waiting for his return.

Hua Binan saw his comprehension. "Exactly. Nangong Xu went off-script. He was meant to let the others take you, and we'd fake your death. But he had his own ideas. I said that we were in love, but you just had to make it obvious with Mo Ran… So he let you go to spite me. No matter. I have my own money."

"What do you want?" He didn't know whether it was the drug or the fear that made it so hard to speak.

"I want *you*. You're my prize, after everything I've had to sacrifice, everything I've achieved. I had to resist you for long enough to help them all, all of us who share that one damn gene, but now they have some compensation, and I can *finally*…"

Hua Binan raised his hand to stroke Chu Wanning's cheek, and Chu Wanning jerked his head back. Whatever paralytic had been in the pu'erh was rising up his arms. "Don't *fucking touch me*!"

Hua Binan's gaze froze. "Don't be so rude. You let that dog Mo Ran slobber over you and paw you, and he doesn't deserve it. I do."

"Don't talk about him like that!"

“I’ll talk about him however I want. He’s scum.” Hua Binan smiled humourlessly. “As everyone will soon find out.”

“What are you…” Dying didn’t scare him, but the thought of Hua Binan hurting Mo Ran was agony. “Don’t kill him. Please.”

“There. Much more polite. And I’m not going to kill him. But the state might do it for me.”

“What are you going to do to him?”

“Nothing at all. He’s already done it to himself.”

“Hua Binan!”

“Ah, ah.”

Chu Wanning was beginning to tremble. “Binan.”

Hua Binan beamed at him. “That’s better. See? This will be perfect, once we work together. As I said. Mo Ran doesn’t love you. He *hates* you.”

Chu Wanning shook his head, or tried to; instead, he weakly jerked it to the side. “You know nothing about him.”

“No, Wanning, *you* know nothing about him,” Hua Binan said. “He’s in love with my younger brother. He just had to snap his fingers and the dog came running.”

Younger brother? The only person he’d ever thought Mo Ran was in love with was…

“Shi Mingjing?” he breathed.

“Finally. Yes, ‘Shi’ Mingjing. We wanted to show you what he’s really like. My brother told Mo Ran that you’d tried to kiss him, tried to force yourself on him, and then threatened to throw him out if he didn’t acquiesce. But he’s quite stupid, so A-Jing really had to lead him by the nose to his nasty little plan. To seduce you, and then denounce you as a hypocrite and a predator who threatens his students if they refuse to sleep with him.”

The world didn’t shudder to a stop. The earth didn’t open from beneath him. The sky didn’t split and the air didn’t burn.

It was so much worse than that.

The universe fell back into its proper order. The stars aligned again as they should; the planet tilted back onto its true axis; the earth beneath him was solid again, as it hadn’t been for months.

“Listen. I used to think you were such *an asshole.”*

“I can’t imagine he was even very subtle. He doesn’t have the intelligence or the patience. No, I imagine he was angry and hateful one day, and apologetic and sweet the next? It wouldn’t work on anyone who didn’t have a disorder like yours… I think that’s more charitable, to blame that, rather than your infatuation.”

“Think. Think, and pay attention to me. When did I start going into your office every morning for coffee? When did I start dragging you to lunch with me every day? December.”

For months, he’d been unmoored, unstable, uncertain. *How* could someone like Mo Ran like someone like him? *Why* was he so kind to Chu Wanning when he manifestly did not deserve it?

He remembered how upset he'd been, when Mo Ran had taken a lesson in massage for his shoulder; it had felt so *wrong*, he'd felt so guilty and overwhelmed. He'd worried in the night that he was somehow taking advantage of Mo Ran, of manipulating him into fulfilling Chu Wanning's selfish desires for love and intimacy, subconsciously targeting someone who had endured so much. All the guilt he had felt after hearing about their childhood interaction swept back tenfold.

But *this*? This quite simply made sense.

Of course Mo Ran didn't, wouldn't, *couldn't* love him. Who could love the unlovable? But if his friendliness was revenge for Shi Mei after his banishment… Suddenly it made sense why Mo Ran had tried so hard to bring him into conversation, day after day, in the face of Chu Wanning's awkwardness and dullness. It made sense, for him to invite him out for meals and to bring him little gifts.

He looked back at Hua Binan, who was studying his expression with satisfaction. "I'm afraid it's even worse than that," he said, voice dripping with concern. "*I* knew that you'd never fall for it. So then he started to get desperate. Tell me… Sometime at the end of January, before that bomb went off, you were ill one night, weren't you? You went out with Mo Ran, for a meal or a drink, and at some point you passed out. You were sick all night, aching and weak and nauseated the next day. Right?"

"How do you know that?" Chu Wanning whispered. "You… it was you?"

Hua Binan sharply slapped him; he couldn't lift his arms to block the blow, and it shocked him more than it hurt.

"Listen to me! Of course it wasn't *me*! It was him! He's the one who drugged you!"

Dioxazine Purple eyes, lip-bruising force, the rasp of brickwork on the back of his hand-

"Mo Ran? Is that you?"

“You’re lying,” Chu Wanning snarled. “Stop lying!”

“Who else would it be? Huh? Who else do you think I’d be? Shi Mei?”

“I *sold* it to him. In – what was it called? – ah, yes, the Xinchao International Entertainment Club in Ya’an.” Hua Binan’s smile was blurring and sharpening, and Chu Wanning realised with a jolt that his body was crying. “He haggled for it, you know. He thought that 500 yuan was too much to pay to rape you. He agreed to 380 in the end.”

“Mo Ran, you- you can’t. We can't. I’m your teacher*…”*

Chu Wanning couldn’t even shake his head; it was aching, pink and purple lights flashing through it. “He didn’t.”

“That’s never stopped you before, has it?”

There was a sound from the landing, of a door being unlocked and then closed, and Hua Binan stood up. “You’ll realise I’m telling you the truth soon enough,” Hua Binan said. “My *jiejie* is looking for the evidence right now. It’ll be faster if you tell us what bar or restaurant it was, and the date, but you’ve confirmed that it happened now, so I’ll tell her to begin searching Wuchang for the CCTV footage.”

He had to get up. He had to get out, but his body refused to obey him. He had to try to reach his phone, but he couldn’t even slide off the sofa.

Hua Binan saw where he was looking. “Ah, yes, well remembered,” he said, went to the counter, and pocketed it. He was dialling a number on his own phone.

“Li Yuxan, yes, I’m afraid you were right. I’ll make sure the door’s locked, but it’s a flimsy one, should only take a couple of blows. Yeah, the drug’s taken, he’ll be no trouble. Give me ten minutes for the old woman to settle in and for me to clear up the tea, then come up.”

Hua Binan tidied up, pouring out the rest of the tea, washing the gongfu set and returning it to its place. He moved slowly, with large movements, but Chu Wanning couldn't move at all. It was probably the same drug that Nangong Xu had used on Nangong Liu, he suddenly thought.

Suddenly there was a violent hammering on the door. "Police! Open up!"

His heart soared – had they been tracking Hua Binan? Was there any operation, to catch the rest of Nangong Xu's gang? He'd never been so glad to hear the police at his door, but he'd take whatever rescue he could.

But Hua Binan just grinned down at him, and Chu Wanning realised. It was a performance for Zhang Xinyi's benefit.

"Chu Wanning! If you don't open up, we'll break in the door! ... Right, pass me the battering ram."

Mo Ran and the Xues would think he was in RSDL. They'd look for him in the legal network, not the criminal one. And in that time, Hua Binan would be able to make both of them vanish.

If Mo Ran even looked for him.

If Mo Ran really had been the one to drug him…

That's what Hua Binan had meant. Once his sister found evidence that Mo Ran had spiked his drink, and Chu Wanning was missing…

Not just drugging. Not just rape. Murder.

“Binan,” he slurred. The paralytic must be affecting his vocal chords. The battering ram sounded on the door; Chu Wanning felt it in his chest. “Please. Don’t do this. You have a choice. You can still choose not to do this...”

“No,” Hua Binan replied. “*You* had a choice. And you rejected it. You have no idea how hurt… But no matter. As I said. We’re going to have all the time in the world for you to make it right.”

Chapter 63: The Snake and the Crab

Chu Wanning woke slowly, with a low groan, like something ancient and long-dead struggling to escape a tar pit. Pain was beating a salvo against the inside of his skull, and his heart stuttered dizzily.

He felt sick. He remembered, suddenly – rolling in the darkness as the van careened around a corner on the Sichuan mountain road. He must have gagged, because someone shook his healing shoulder.

"Word to the wise, Dr. Chu. Throw up if you must, but the bag's not getting removed, so I'd advise against it. You do you, though."

A van. Driving, for hours, or what felt like it, on winding roads…

He remembered Zhang Xinyi's voice from the landing, muffled but scared.

"What are you doing?! He's not in – he hasn't come back from Shanghai yet!"

"He arrived last night. Stand aside."

"But you don't need to break it in, you don't need to use that thing – if he's in, he'll answer the door – Xiao Chu always answers the door-"

There was something hideous within him, a solid void of devastated certainty…

"Mo Ran…"

Mo Ran. Mo Ran loved Shi Mingjing. Mo Ran was the man in the purple light.

He couldn't believe it, and yet he knew that it was true. He'd always known it, that someone as beautiful and kind and charismatic as Mo Ran could never like Chu Wanning, but he'd lied to himself. So pathetic. So wretchedly *pathetic*.

But who had told him? Who…?

Hua Binan. The memories began to slot into their correct order, and a small but sharp pain in his arm finally gave him the push he needed to force his eyelids open.

The first thing he saw was Hua Binan, sitting on the side of the bed on which he was lying, bending over him with a slight line of concentration marring his perfect forehead.

"There," he said, pressing a piece of cotton to the needlemark with all the appearance of professional tenderness. "They said you were feeling poorly on the drive. That'll help with the nausea and the dizziness in a couple of minutes."

Chu Wanning blinked. He didn't recognise the room they were in: it was a confusing mixture of styles and attributes. The wooden beams suggested a farmhouse, but the walls between them were newly painted. It was spartan, with nothing on the walls, but had a half-open sliding door that showed a small bathroom.

There was a modern glass window. It had metal shutters on the outside, and metal bars within.

"It's not for long," Hua Binan said apologetically. "I had to make some adjustments. I asked my sister to find us an appropriate place to hole up for a while. Rural, quiet, so we wouldn't be disturbed. And owned by someone that no one would miss."

The pain in his head was steadily becoming worse; Chu Wanning could feel his heart fluttering. "Someone no one…?"

“She’s very clever. She found a perfect candidate, one who fitted our particular criteria and more besides. Two miles from the nearest neighbours, who never spoke to him because everyone knew he’d killed his wife. And now he’s buried in the same plot of land where he probably buried her. Isn’t that poetic? Contrapasso, as Nangong Xu would say.”

Chu Wanning had no idea how long he’d been unconscious. “Are we still in Sichuan…?”

“Mm. Just about. I wanted to be close by, for…” Hua Binan smiled. “Your mouth will be dry. Here, have some water.”

Chu Wanning slowly pulled his head away from the plastic cup that Hua Binan was offering. He blinked again. There was crust in his eyes, and he tried to raise his hand to rub them.

His muscles were obeying him again, at least, but he realised with a sudden surge of panic that he was restrained. This brought him crashing back to full consciousness; he tried to sit up, but a strap across his chest kept him pinned in a supine position. He strained his neck to look down, and saw that his wrists and ankles were in padded hospital restraints. The kind that Huaizui had used to say he’d be spending his life in, if not for his unceasing efforts and generosity.

“Hua Binan!”

“It’s ‘Binan’, Wanning, we’ve been over this-”

“Untie me.” His full memory returned to him, in full and blessed rage. His voice was as cold as a blade. “Right now.”

Hua Binan frowned. “Enough of that. I’m not your student anymore. You’re hardly in a position to be giving me orders.”

Chu Wanning twisted his wrist, trying to find a buckle with his fingers.

"I'm afraid they're manufactured by Guyueye – a fact we both dislike, I'm sure, but they really are the best."

He couldn't panic. His heart was beating fast and erratic, but outrage was keeping his head relatively clear, clouding out terror. He was not afraid of Hua Binan, he told himself. What was the worst he could do to him?

Kill him?

Then he wouldn't have to think about what he'd said about Mo Ran.

"Undo them. If you want to talk, I'll talk, but only if you undo these."

"I'm afraid I can't. It has to be like this, until we can trust each other fully."

"If you think I'll ever trust you again you're deluded."

Hua Binan smiled at him. "It's not just one-way, though, is it? As I said. My bones are quite brittle. I'm afraid of you. I love you, but I'm afraid of you. What you could do to me. You could break my bones as easily as my father could my mother's. So I have to even the field a little, for my own protection."

Chu Wanning wanted to laugh. Or to vomit. "*Your* protection?"

"Yes. And this means that you won't hurt yourself either. It's for all of our protection… But is it *very* uncomfortable?"

Chu Wanning didn't justify that with an answer.

"Oh dear. If it is, well, there's an alternative." Hua Binan drifted to a table in the corner of the room; Chu Wanning turned his head, trying to see what it bore. He could only see the glint of glass and metal.

"I understand how the restraints seem undignified. It hurts your pride, to look like a patient in an asylum. I understand. But you see, I want to talk to you, properly. Most drugs would make you fall unconscious too, and to keep having to inject each limb with localised paralytics would be so tedious. And it would keep interrupting our conversation."

Hua Binan came back to the bed. He flicked his finger against a syringe, and a drop of liquid fell from the tip of its needle.

"I can do things with this that Nangong Xu needed ten men to achieve. Have you heard of succinylcholine? It's called a muscle relaxant, but it causes complete muscular paralysis. But not unconsciousness. You'd be unable to breathe on your own, unable to speak, unable to move your eyes… and fully conscious. I have bottles of it, right here." Hua Binan smiled. "But I didn't want to have to use that. I thought you'd find it very distressing. You'd panic – that's not a judgement, *everyone* panics – and that would put pressure on your heart. Now, you know what you find more comfortable. It's your choice. But personally, I think that for the moment the straps are better. Don't you agree?"

He was not afraid of Hua Binan, Chu Wanning told himself. He was *not* afraid of Hua Binan.

But his heart was, it told him, screaming. His skin was, it told him as it broke out in icy sweat. His hair was, it told him as it rose.

"I asked you a question. Don't you agree?"

He was not afraid of Hua Binan.

But he couldn't tear his eyes away from the needle.

"I'll take your silence as disagreement then; if you'd prefer the succinylcholine, your wish is my command-"

"No," Chu Wanning said, too quickly. He could feel the heat of shame spreading over his neck, his throat tight. "I agree."

"That the straps are better than the succinylcholine?"

"Yes."

"That's what I thought – I'm so glad I got it right." Hua Binan put the needle on the bedside table, and sat down again on the bed. He smiled, as though nothing had just happened, and lifted his hand to stroke an errant lock out of Chu Wanning's eyes.

Chu Wanning jerked his head back. "Don't fucking touch me."

"Swearing again? Honestly, Wanning, it isn't seemly. It isn't *you*. You always used to speak so elegantly, until that street-dog got his claws into you."

"You don't think the situation might have some influence?"

"The situation is that we are happy," Hua Binan said. "The situation is that I have gone to a great deal of trouble and expense for you, and the least you could do is show a little gratitude."

Even more than rage, Chu Wanning was overwhelmed with confusion. Who was mad – Hua Binan or him? Because their realities were so at odds, so mutually exclusive, that someone had to have lost their hold on sanity.

“Hua Binan,” he said, and when Hua Binan opened his mouth to object, Chu Wanning spoke over him. “*Hua Binan*. I’m not going to engage in this folie à deux with you. Do you honestly believe that this, any of this, could endear me to you? Because if you truly believe that we are, I don’t even know, going to be friends… Listen, this can be fixed. All right? Let me go, and I won’t tell anyone. Who would believe me? Go abroad. There are people who can help you. I’ll help you find someone. And you’ll be happier in the long run, because believing in this will only make you sick within yourself.”

Hua Binan smiled down at him, eyes creasing with fondness. “So earnest. Underneath all the spikes and the anger you’re secretly quite quixotic, aren’t you? You tried the same thing with Nangong Liu in your recording. Appealing to his better nature, when he didn’t have one. I am as perfectly sane as he was. I know exactly what I’m doing, and I know that right now, you are angry with me, that you are unwilling… But I am articulating an inevitable reality into being, and you will eventually realise that resisting it will only bring you more pain before you come to understand how happy I can make you.”

Chu Wanning tried to twist his arm against the restraints, praying to find some give, some weakness or opening. Hua Binan’s words, all delivered in his soft, reasonable voice, chilled him to the bone, made him sick with a growing horror. “It will never happen.”

“You underestimate me. It doesn’t matter. You’re mine now, and you won’t escape.” Hua Binan’s eyes lingered on the padded strap around Chu Wanning’s wrist, and as though the world slowed down, Chu Wanning noticed the way he shifted, the size of his pupils, the slightest shudder in his inhalation, the faint pink spreading across his face.

His education in such things may have been recent, but it had been thorough. Hua Binan was aroused.

“You disgusting bastard!”

Hua Binan’s eyes flickered up to his. “No need to be so judgemental. *You’re* the one who was infatuated with his own student.”

Chu Wanning couldn't help but struggle; his muscles strained, and the ache in his left shoulder grew, but all his body wanted was to free itself and strangle the man in front of him.

It was useless; the straps barely moved. So Chu Wanning summoned all the acid in his withered soul and allowed every drop of his contempt and impatience and disdain to rise to the surface of his face. "And you're your father's son."

Hua Binan slapped him so hard that his teeth rattled, and then backhanded him. Chu Wanning blinked, dazed, and then Hua Binan's hand was around his ligatured neck, fingers tight against the delicate new skin.

"I want to make it very, very clear about what is and is not allowable here. You've been able to get away with saying whatever you damn well please until now…"

Hua Binan's face was dark, and he squeezed his fingers; black stars exploded in agonising coruscations in front of Chu Wanning's eyes.

"But here, in *my* hands, you'd better behave yourself."

He released his grip, and Chu Wanning drew a breath like a knife scoring down the inside of his throat.

Chu Wanning tried to blink the wasps from his vision and exhale past the needles in his diaphragm as Hua Binan stood up and went back to the table. He returned after a moment, carrying a strange pair of scissors – bent at the pivot pin, with a flat edge and a circular bump at the end of the lower blade.

He had seen them in First Aid kits, and he vaguely remembered another pair – in the ambulance in Rufeng, shearing up through his pyjama top, after Huaizui had stabbed him.

More recently, the doctor had used them to cut his black tie jacket.

“What are you doing?” he said, unable to keep his disbelief out of his voice. “Hua Binan!”

Without ceremony, Hua Binan cut up the length of Chu Wanning’s jumper, neatly bisecting the arrow and laurels of the faded CNSA logo.

He didn’t know why that hurt so much more than the blows. He had always relied on his face and clothes and manner and qualifications as his last defence – being as cold and haughty and intimidating as possible, lest anyone understand how vulnerable he was underneath. Hua Binan slicing through his CNSA jumper felt like he’d carefully, calmly, sawn through his sternum, dug his fingers in between his ribs, and cracked open his chest like a crab’s shell.

That was it. He was an animal’s corpse, a dead thing to feast on. An object. He wasn’t a human being anymore.

If he had ever been one at all.

His mind still refused to comprehend what Hua Binan was doing, what he wanted, what he was planning. It felt so outrageous that it was incredible, in the true meaning of the word – it was simply unbelievable.

Hua Binan cut up the sleeves of the jumper so that he could pull it out from under Chu Wanning without undoing the straps. When he began to cut his t-shirt as well, Chu Wanning was briefly pulled from his numb, floating state. He remembered cutting the sleeves from his shirt so that it would fit Mo Ran while they were in Yuliang, and it hurt so much that he was surprised his heart continued to beat. Had that been part of a ploy? Had he still been in contact with Shi Mingjing then? Had they been laughing at Chu Wanning’s pathetic, disgusting gestures of care?

“What is this?” Hua Binan said suddenly. His eyes were blazing.

Chu Wanning blinked the tears from his eyes and tried to focus. “What? Hua Binan…”

There was a sharp line of pain across the back of his neck, and then Hua Binan was holding up the broken silver chain, from which dangled the single drop of blood-red stone.

"Did *he* give this to you?" Hua Binan studied the pendant. "A cheap bit of agate? You didn't sell yourself for much, did you?"

There was no point in responding.

Chapter 64: The Spoils of War

Chapter Notes

> Hello! Thank you so, so much to all of you who left comments on the last chapter, especially morganalefan and little cloudberry for such long comments! I haaaated the last chapter when I posted it, I felt so rubbish, and I nearly deleted it about three times, but it was all your comments that made me calm down a little and assess it with a less miserable and dramatic and self-critical eye!
>
> I'm still mentally rather fragile, and I knew that it would be hard to reply to most of your comments without referring to this chapter, so please forgive me for just going ahead and posting it instead.
>
> This chapter contains a graphic scene of rape; it is depicted as violent and not erotic.

Hua Binan dropped the pendant onto the bedside table without giving it another glance, his contempt apparent. The silver chain fell across the syringe.

The air flowed in currents across the bare skin of Chu Wanning's chest: cold from the walls, and warm from the space-heater.

His fingers groped around the padded restraint. He couldn't lift his head far enough to see them, but he thought he could hear the faint creak of leather. Why, of all the things in this world, had he never researched this?

He knew that like many people with autism his limbs were hypermobile, which had been remarked upon more than once by his tai chi instructors. Unfortunately, Hua Binan apparently knew this as well, and had made sure the restraints were tight against his skin.

"Mm..."

Chu Wanning realised that Hua Binan had been watching his blind exploration. "Let me go. Why are you *doing* this?" he asked, and his voice cracked. "I did everything I could to help

you, I don't understand-!"

"It's *because* you did everything," Hua Binan said. "Wanning, Wanning… I'm not punishing you. I'm rewarding you."

Hua Binan bent over, and forced his lips against Chu Wanning's.

The disgust he felt was unbearable; he would have taken excruciating agony over this revolting horror in a second. Hua Binan's tongue licked between his lips, as quick as a snake, and was gone before Chu Wanning could bite down.

Would Mo Ran feel disgusted, knowing that he'd been kissed like this by another man, however unwilling? Would he feel betrayed, thinking that Chu Wanning had invited it? Or would he feel relieved, that he could end the sham he'd been trapped in without being the villain of the piece?

What had he done wrong? If Mo Ran really had been the one to drug him… That made three of his students who had assaulted him. Mo Ran, Shi Mingjing, and Hua Binan.

Anything could happen once; that was a choice made by a person. Something that happened twice – well, it was worrying, but could be a coincidence.

Three times was correlation. Three times was a pattern.

Three times meant it was Chu Wanning's fault.

He was the common denominator, just as he had been for Huaizui stabbing him, for Rong Yan's death, Nangong Liu's hatred, the Shangqing barrier, the bomb, Rufeng. He was not cursed; he *was* the curse, bringing out people's worst instincts, putting everyone around him in danger.

And somehow, worst of all, inviting *this*.

What was it? What had he done wrong? What kind of disgusting impression was he giving, to cause this reaction in his students?

Or was it not an unwitting action at all? Was it just *him*? Was it that people were able to recognise that he wasn't really human? That he was something *else*, something alien and foreign and detestable. An object upon which they could safely act out their hatreds or desires. A thing.

The words from an old piece of hate mail floated to the surface of his mind.

You are not a human being. What kind of object are you?

It was clear. It was visible in him, somehow. Even complete strangers could see it.

Hua Binan finished cutting the fabric of his trousers and his underwear and pulled them out, dropping the rags to the side as though they were rubbish.

He looked down at Chu Wanning's naked body like he was assessing a blueprint. His eyes lingered on the… *part* of Chu Wanning that only a couple of days before, Mo Ran had taken into his mouth. Chu Wanning had worried it would disgust him – how had Mo Ran been able to hide his disgust?

"How is it dirty? Nothing *about you is dirty."*

At this moment, every atom of him felt dirty.

Dirty and small. The room was cold despite a whirring fan heater somewhere out of sight, and Chu Wanning had to close his eyes. He was almost, obscenely, grateful for the restraints;

if his hands had been free, he would not have been able to resist the urge to cover himself. They allowed him to feign even the slightest degree of dignity.

Hua Binan looked up and down his body, and then frowned. “Hm.” He came around and reached down; he drew Chu Wanning’s hair out from under his head, and smoothed it over his chest, on the left hand side. “There.”

The scar over his heart.

Chu Wanning suddenly just wanted to cry.

Instead, he sneered with contempt while Hua Binan injected his thighs with something, and then slowly undressed. Hua Binan smiled at him in return, as though they were shy lovers getting ready to go to bed together for the first time. He was slim, but where Chu Wanning’s body was all lines and angles, Hua Binan looked perfectly elegant.

Any moment now, he thought. Xue Meng had appeared and disturbed Shi Mingjing; something had happened to make Mo Ran- to make the man who spiked his drink stop. Something would happen now.

What happened was that Hua Binan undid the restraints around his ankles; Chu Wanning tried to kick him around the head, but it felt like lifting something made of lead. “You fucking coward,” he snarled.

“You always said that caution was the great virtue of the engineer,” Hua Binan replied, kneeling on the bed and bending to kiss Chu Wanning’s chest. “You smell so good…”

Hua Binan’s lips and tongue, the sensation of his skin against Chu Wanning’s, was the most disgusting thing he’d ever felt. It felt like maggots writhing between the fibres of his muscles. Soft touch, without pain or pressure, made sick energy like electricity run along his nerves.

“This is your last chance,” Chu Wanning said. “Get the *fuck* off me. *Stop*.”

Hua Binan laughed. “Or you’ll what?” he replied, and sucked a bruise against Chu Wanning’s collarbone.

Then he pulled back down the bed, hitched one of Chu Wanning’s dead legs over his hip, and readied himself. His eyes were gleaming.

This was the moment that someone would come, Chu Wanning tried to reassure himself. Mo Ran, Xue Meng, Xue Zhengyong, Nangong Si. The police. *Anyone*. He didn’t care who saw him in his shame and humiliation, how they judged him or blamed him, as long as someone *stopped this*.

No one did.

*

Mo Ran didn’t know the etiquette around Christmas presents, and specifically, what date to give them on. The 6th of December? The 24th? 25th? Sometime in January? His brief research had given him several different answers, depending on the kind of Christian and the country they lived in, so he decided to bring the gift he’d brought in the German market in Shanghai and give it to Chu Wanning after their dinner.

He’d found it at a cashmere stall, while Chu Wanning was looking at the butterflies. He’d been unprepared for how much cashmere cost, but it was just too perfect.

A matching set of hat, scarf, and gloves, as soft and white as summer clouds.

Of course, he then learnt that gifts of hats and of white things were unlucky, but then he reasoned: hadn’t they been unlucky anyway? Maybe he was some kind of nexus of luck, a distorted polarity of some kind, and he should actually be giving unlucky gifts instead?

He'd ask Chu Wanning what he'd prefer. Mo Ran knew he'd not mind being told what a gift was; he disliked surprises, after all. With that in mind, he'd brought exactly the ingredients that Chu Wanning had mentioned that morning – though he had splashed out on lamb rather than mutton.

He let himself into the building with the key that Chu Wanning had given back to him, and climbed the stairs two at a time, whistling.

"Xiao Mo!" someone said above – the frisky old lady that Chu Wanning did tai chi with, his mind supplied, the one who gamely engaged in some good-natured sexual harassment every time he carried her shopping up for her.

"Ah, hi, Auntie! We were away longer than-"

"Xiao Mo!" she said again, turning the corner of the stairs. She was crying.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?" Mo Ran said, reaching out his hands automatically. "Auntie Zhang?"

"Xiao Chu – they took him – those bastards took Xiao Chu-"

No, no, no no no nonono-

Mo Ran had dropped the bags – his wok clanged on the concrete, bounced noisily down the steps – and ran up the final few stairs. The door to Chu Wanning's flat was open, the frame splintered, the handle smashed in.

On the floor lay the chain-latch, still fastened together. He'd had the latch on, just like Mo Ran always told him to.

He turned back to Zhang Xinyi. "Who was it? Who took him?!"

“The police!” Zhang Xinyi cried. “He’s always answered the door to them before; like last time, in the summer. I told them if they’d just give him a minute then he’d answer the door, he always answers the door. But they had a big- something like a wide rod, a metal battering ram or something-”

“Did they have any badges? Any patches on their arms?”

“No, no, I- I didn’t see – they just had ‘Police’ written on their helmets, and their vests…”

“Helmets?” Helmets, to arrest *Chu Wanning*? “Definitely helmets, not caps or hats?”

“No, not caps. They- I’ve not seen police like them in Wuchang before. They were wearing these thick black vests, like on the television – I’ve never seen any of the police in Wuchang wearing them…”

Fuck. Ya’an again if they were lucky, Chengdu if they weren’t.

Linyi was still just about the worst city in existence, but Ya’an was fucking up there in terms of bad experiences and assholes per square kilometre. The pathetic, insecure police, that annoying dickhead Hua Binan, and worst of all, Shi Mei…

Just like last time: the *second* Chu Wanning came back from Shanghai, they descended to teach him who was boss.

“It’s okay, Auntie, it’s okay. They do this to him, the bastards. Did they hurt you, are you all right?”

“I’m fine!” she said fiercely. “One of them pushed me back into my flat, but I saw them bring him out. They’d put a bag on his head! Why would someone need to do that to Xiao Chu, he always goes with them quiet as a lamb…”

Anxiety tightened its grip on Mo Ran's intestines. "Did you see the van? What did it say?"

"Nothing. It was plain black, not the normal kind."

Fuck.

*

Sex with Mo Ran had been… expansive. Chu Wanning had felt like he was a star in pulsation, sending out waves of light and warmth with every square inch of his body. He had felt as though every strand of hair was alive, as though he could feel every eyelash.

And he had been able to feel Mo Ran more than anything. He'd felt, for *once*, as though he really understood what another human being was thinking, was feeling. A part of the human race after all.

How stupid he'd been.

In contrast, this action that Hua Binan was forcing on him made the world narrow. Even when Mo Ran had been coaxing him open with fingers and lubricant, he'd never been so aware of his anus as he was now. *He* wasn't located in his brain or his heart or behind his eyes; everything that wasn't the site of the outrage melted away into nothingness. He barely heard the lewd slap of flesh against flesh, or felt the friction along the length of his penis, or the restraints around his wrists. Hua Binan's face ghosted in front of him, contorted in sensation, and he didn't recognise it. He had no memory of *supervisions* or *conferences* or *tutorials* to which to compare it. Everything that was 'Chu Wanning' was gone.

There was just a hole that Hua Binan was using, and that was where his painful consciousness of the world ended and began.

And it hurt. Sex with Mo Ran had made him ache, but had been satisfying beyond words as well; the burn and the bliss formed an intoxicating ouroboros, each one feeding and consuming the other.

This was just pain. Pain and revulsion and shame and humiliation. But *physical* pain particularly, overwhelming: the stretching and tearing of delicate skin, the bruising of hidden flesh, the nauseating rhythm of someone stabbing to the hilt, with no preparation or help, into the unwilling object of his body.

“You’re so tight…”

This pain was dark, the blood-red of a beating, his hips moaning with the ache of it. But then Hua Binan gave a particularly violent thrust and there was a punctuation of vermillion, a single bright spot that Mo Ran had also reached, and the pulse sent a twisted kind of pleasure up his spine, pooling perfidiously in his penis.

A syllable of distressed shock was forced out of him.

“See? I- ah- told you- told you I’d make you like it,” Hua Binan said, and Chu Wanning wished his broken heart would give out; he wished he could die like Hua Binan’s mother had, to make him a murderer and a corpse-defiler as well as a rapist.

Then Hua Binan was shuddering above him, and with a grunt Chu Wanning felt a warmth somewhere within. He wanted to vomit it, to vomit it all the way up through his digestive tract and then choke to death on it.

Hua Binan was breathing heavily as he pulled himself out, then lay on the bed alongside Chu Wanning. Semen from his softening penis smeared against Chu Wanning’s thigh.

Looking down, Chu Wanning saw that it was mottled with pink.

He blinked at the cracks in the ceiling until he was confident that his unshed tears wouldn't fall. He tucked his feelings far away, hidden even from him, while Hua Binan hummed against his chest in post-coital pleasure, chin balanced coyly on his sternum.

"Have you ever read Dostoevsky?"

"Hm?" Hua Binan smiled at him. "What, Wanning?"

"Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment*."

"No. I'm afraid I never had the time. I was too busy seeking real punishment for real crimes."

"A pity. The context is wrong, but... 'You are a great sinner, and your worst sin is that you have destroyed and betrayed yourself for nothing.'"

Coldness returned to Hua Binan's eyes. "For nothing, you say?"

"Well. For- what was it? Two minutes? You didn't last very long."

Hua Binan exhaled an approximation of amusement. "I'm assuming Mo Ran lasted longer?"

"You've become a rapist like your father for the time it takes to boil a kettle."

It would have felt better if Hua Binan hit him again, but he didn't. Instead he sighed. "You know… I always thought that we were similar. Compatible, you know? Both very clean people. So I was thinking about how to let you stay that way. I think I worked out how to do it safely for both of us."

Hua Binan idly moved a lock of Chu Wanning's hair back to cover the scar on his chest. "Every morning and evening, I'd give you a sedative, measured out to give you about twenty minutes of consciousness. I could undo one of your hands, and then be safely out of the door before you freed yourself. Then I'd let you use the bathroom there, and the shower, stretch your legs a little. No doubt for the first few days you'll try to find some way to escape, but that's all right. Then the sedative would make you fall asleep, and then I could make sure you were safe and sound again."

Peach-blossom eyes bore into Chu Wanning's. "I don't *have* to do that. If you're going to be hurtful and unkind, then it might take a few days for my feelings to recover. A few days tied here, with nothing to drink, no trips to the toilet… Lying in your own filth. So think carefully before you decide to be so unpleasant."

He took in whatever expression Chu Wanning's face was making, and then his own expression brightened into a smile. "Did you come?"

Chu Wanning blinked, and he felt wetness run down into his ear. "What?" he croaked.

"I don't think you came. Aiyo, I'm sorry. I was just so excited, it made me selfish."

He looked at Hua Binan, and everything about his expression was sincere. The miniscule conjunctions of eyes and mouth and voice that Chu Wanning had laboriously catalogued and assembled into a series of mental logic-gates all suggested that Hua Binan truly believed what he was saying.

But he didn't, Chu Wanning thought. He didn't know how he knew, but he *knew* that Hua Binan was playing with him, just like he was now playing with his penis, thumb rubbing his foreskin back.

"Don't fucking touch me," his body said, playing its part, reciting its lines. Meanwhile, Chu Wanning drew further and further away, into the dark pain below.

"No, no, I was remiss. Here. Let me. After all, it'll be a few minutes before I'm up for Round Two."

Chapter 65: Corrupt Officials, Filthy Clerks

Mo Ran sprinted to the Wuchang People's Police station, with no hope that it had been them to take Chu Wanning into custody. The sleepy, friendly man on the front desk confirmed that the only person they had in the cells was a drunkard who regularly fell asleep in the park, brought in to sleep it off in the warmth.

Bastards. The stupid bastards! He *knew*, deep down, that it was the bastards in Ya'an again; they were *obsessed*, the stupid, sad fuckers.

He quickly texted his uncle, and then rang Zhu Ruoxuan, Chu Wanning's local lawyer. He was at a trial in Chengdu, and was sincerely surprised by the news.

"I wouldn't have expected it, after everything that happened in Linyi. Maybe they want to hear his side of it again? I don't know – we can definitely file a complaint this time."

"I'm just worried that it isn't Ya'an," Mo Ran said. "His neighbour said that it was an unmarked black van, not a police one. Doesn't that suggest Ministry of State Security?"

"Mn. We might be looking at RSDL again. Chu Wanning keeps scrupulous accounts, so it'd be hard to make an accusation of tax evasion, but perhaps they're worried about all the new positive press about him."

"Should I use that? Post about it on Weibo or Douyin?"

"No, no, absolutely not. It could backfire, and they could punish him if they think people are agitating on his behalf. If it is the Ministry of State Security then it could be a long-haul thing, and we need to be cautious. If it was this afternoon he's probably still in Sichuan… I'm in court all day tomorrow, but I'll ask who I can here in Chengdu if they've heard anything."

"What about me?" Mo Ran said. He felt sick. "What can I do?"

“Not much, I’m afraid. Staying calm and quiet is the best course of action. It’d be good to know exactly who took him into custody…”

“Wait. I know someone – he’s in the Blue Sword Commando Unit. He might be able to look into it.”

“Hmm – don’t let him put himself at risk, but if he’s able to find out anything… Look, I have to go, but you have my number. I’ll call you tomorrow. I’ll see what I can do here in Chengdu, and perhaps you can phone Ya’an and your contact.”

The People’s Police station in Ya’an, predictably, denied any knowledge. Mo Ran had more hope for something from Nangong Si, who immediately promised to look into it and call in some favours.

The night stretched ahead of him like a void.

He was able to fill fifteen minutes with calling a carpenter to come and replace Chu Wanning’s door in the morning. The only thing Mo Ran could do then was to sit on the sofa all night, like a guard-dog, protecting Chu Wanning’s vulnerable flat like he hadn’t been able to protect Chu Wanning himself.

Once the door was fixed, he went straight to the Xues. Being alone was agonising; he felt as though his skin was on fire. He wished that he could communicate telepathically, even empathically. He wanted to know that Chu Wanning was all right, not in pain or scared, and if he was, then Mo Ran wanted to feel the same thing.

His aunt and uncle were worried, of course, but they didn’t seem to be seized by the same excruciating panic.

“Ran’er, you have to remember, this has happened time and time again,” his uncle said. “It might be that because doubt was cast on Mu Huohan’s ruling that they’re opening up the Shangqing case again. If they are, then we’ll help however we can – Yuheng knows that. The

first time he was in RSDL he was all alone, and when he was in the detention centre. This time he knows he has friends on the outside. He'll be fine."

It made Mo Ran want to rip his hair out.

What had he done, the last time Chu Wanning had been in custody, before the summer?

He'd been happy, he remembered with an acidic self-loathing. He'd been relieved that he wouldn't be told off about some stupid fucking homework or bad test result.

How could he have been such a piece of *shit?* How could anyone have borne his company, when he was so selfish, so short-sighted and callous?

It was a wonder that Xue Meng was even still speaking to him, but it was also a comfort; he was the only person who was as lacking in stoicism as him, and they spent hours and hours rehashing the uniforms of each police branch, the possibility of who could have made the arrest, going over all the Rufeng evidence again for any clue as to what could have triggered this.

Three days passed in fits and starts. On the fourth morning, Mo Ran woke with a slight fever and a feeling of dread. August's arrest had been two days, and Chu Wanning had been allowed a phone call. This time, Chu Wanning hadn't been able to contact Zhu Ruoxuan at all.

"There has to be something we can do," Xue Meng said, as he and Mo Ran stirred their breakfast listlessly. "Has the case in Chengdu finished yet?"

"Not yet, but Mr. Zhu said that the closing statements are tomorrow. I still think it has to be Ya'an, it was last time."

"Shall we drive there?" Xue Meng said. "There's nothing we can do here. We could at least ask in person."

“Be annoying enough that they give us a clue, you mean? It helped last time…”

“It’s not like we’re of any use here.”

“It’s not like you’ll be of any use there either,” Xue Zhengyong said with uncharacteristic sternness. There were shadows under his eyes. “You two – don’t draw attention to yourselves!”

“Dad, you were the Mayor of Chengdu! Surely if *you* called them-“

“What do you think I’ve been doing? Aiya, I’ve called every morning and every afternoon. No one’s taking responsibility. Boys… this might be a long one, if it’s RSDL. You can’t keep on like this. It’s not healthy. Yuheng wouldn’t want you to make yourselves ill. And he certainly wouldn’t want you to go around annoying important people and drawing attention to yourselves!”

“But we have to do something!” Xue Meng cried.

“Waiting is something. You’re both adults. You need to act like it.”

The number of scoldings Xue Meng had received from his father could be counted on one hand, and this stunned him into silence.

Chu Wanning would probably have quoted Confucius and said that reeds must bend in the wind or whatever.

But Mo Ran would have said that sometimes it was better to ask for forgiveness than permission, and from the look his cousin sent him, Xue Meng felt the same. In a rare moment of wordless familial communication, they casually excused themselves, Xue Meng having the sense to linger a few extra minutes, separately packed duffel bags, and met half an hour

later in Xue Meng's car.

*

It was so strange, how quickly the unbearable could become a routine.

The first morning that Hua Binan used the injection, Chu Wanning stayed awake for as long as he could.

First, although adrenaline crashed him to consciousness, he feigned sleep for a while, blinking blearily as Hua Binan moved swiftly to the door to lock it. He suspected that Hua Binan had a camera somewhere, and this would be the only time he could closely examine the straps without arousing too much suspicion.

A padded section secured with Velcro, and then another strap of polyester webbing tightened with a two pairs of D rings. This soft manacle was attached to a wider strap that went under his waist, and then was attached to the bed with a locking pin.

It was clever – the tautness of it meant that he would have trouble reaching the underside of the bed, where the restraint's foible was.

No sheets or pillow, lest he shred them as a rope to hang himself with. Just a towel underneath him that he vaguely remembered Hua Binan pulling out from underneath him, at the end of it.

Not that Chu Wanning had any intention of killing himself. If he died, then Hua Binan would have access to his corpse, and his corpse would make a murder case against Mo Ran a thousand times easier to manufacture.

He had freed himself, and noted the camera in the corner of the ceiling. He didn't need to pretend to stagger, however; moving had been uncomfortable, but standing sent pain shooting up his spine. His hips screamed in protest and his legs nearly buckled, but he managed to catch onto the bed to keep himself from falling.

Think of something else. Anything else. Don't give the bastard the satisfaction.

Chu Wanning pushed all his feelings deep, deep within himself, as he relieved himself and performed what ablutions his slow limbs would permit him. His ignored the blood in the bowl and the flakes of pink that had stiffened and dried on his thighs and abdomen.

There was no mirror, presumably so that he couldn't smash it. A small mercy. Seeing his face right now would have utterly undone him.

A white dressing gown had been left for him, and he realised with disgust that it could be undone to provide easy access to… to parts of his body. But it was warm, and it was a relief to be clothed even in something so lacking.

That first morning, he had sat on the floor of the bathroom and leant his head against the wall. The sedative was taking effect, but he'd used his last few minutes of wakefulness to look at the taps and the pipes, hoping for any piece of loose metal he might be able to use…

When he woke up again, he was back on the bed, with Hua Binan looking down at him.

"There you are. Did the sedative take you unawares? Or were you just being petty and making extra work for me?"

Chu Wanning had stared past his face and let his vision go out of focus.

"Because you didn't seem to have fallen, or hit your head. So I think perhaps you were just being selfish. If you do that again, I'll be selfish in return, and save my back."

Chu Wanning didn't dignify him with a response, but that evening he made sure that he was closer to the bed when he passed out again, and in the mornings following. It was more and more difficult to last twenty minutes in any case; Hua Binan had him on a liquid diet, for the

obvious reason, but the physically weaker Chu Wanning felt, the slower he'd run through his supply of drugs.

His brain skirted around the other thing. The daily, nightly thing. It was something too large and monstrous to comprehend; he could only glance at it in his peripheral vision, or it would destroy him completely.

Survive. Escape. Protect Mo Ran. That was all that mattered.

*

Mo Ran and Xue Meng shared a room in Ya'an, in the hotel closest to the main station that Mo Ran had stayed in before.

"It'd be funny if we ran into Shi Mei while we were here," Xue Meng said as they mindlessly watched the first episode of some drama with Xiao Ranxin and her evil stepmother or something.

"Not really."

"No. You're right."

Mo Ran checked his phone again for any message from Nangong Si. "What's taking him so long?"

"He probably has to meet whoever he knows in person. No paper trail." Xue Meng looked sidelong at him. "Mo Ran… you do realise that if it was Ya'an who arrested him, he'd have been moved to a detention centre by now?

Mo Ran shook his head. "It's up to thirty-seven days without an official arrest for serious crimes. If it's the MSS it's six months."

“They never keep anyone for more than thirty days though. It’s usually, like, three. So if-”

“Zhu Ruoxuan would have told us if they’d charged him.”

“Would they tell him?”

Mo Ran fell silent at that. Xue Meng was talking sense, perhaps, maybe, but he couldn’t believe it. He refused to.

The next morning they wore the smartest clothes they’d bought with them, and went to the Public Security Bureau. Ya’an was living up to its reputation as the most dark and dismal city in China, with heavy clouds that turned the sky a uniform grey.

As expected, the officers behind the main desk glared coldly at them. “And who are you looking for?”

“Chu Wanning. His lawyer’s in Chengdu, but-”

“Are you family?”

“No, but-”

“Even if he is here, you can only see prisoners if you’re family.”

“That’s fine,” Mo Ran said, with his most charmingly deferential smile. “Of course. We just want to know if he’s here.”

“We don’t tell-” one of the officers said, then stopped; his colleague had written something on a sheet of paper and slid it across the desk to him. “What did you say your name was?”

“Mo Ran.”

“Mine’s Xue Meng.”

The officer ignored him. “Go and sit over there. I’ll ring upstairs.”

Underneath the desk, Mo Ran gave Xue Meng a thumbs-up. They retreated to a row of seats by the wall, which gave them an excellent view of the huge poster bearing a slogan:

LENIENCY TO THOSE WHO CONFESS

SEVERITY TO THOSE WHO RESIST

Mo Ran supressed a shiver. Hospitals, Linyi, and now the Ya’an Public Security Bureau. The list of fucked-up places he’d only darken the doorway of for Chu Wanning’s sake was growing.

Just then, his mobile buzzed. He raised his eyebrows at Xue Meng and answered it, heart in his throat. “Nangong Si?”

“Yes, sorry it took so long, I couldn’t use phones or e-mail to- doesn’t matter who. Chu Wanning’s not been arrested.”

Mo Ran blinked, and ice cracked down his spine. “So he’s… So it’s the MSS for certain?”

“No. I didn’t mean he’s not been arrested by the People’s Police; he’s not been arrested at all. The MSS doesn’t know anything about it, he’s not in their system.”

The currents churned in his head; his scalp felt numb; his knees felt weak. “But- but some secret department-”

“He’d still be flagged. Look, I’m at work, I have to go. You need to report him as missing.”

“He’s not been arrested,” Mo Ran said to Xue Meng. “But- what does that mean? Nangong Si!”

“It means it’s someone else. I have to go – I’ll call you in a couple of hours, I have to go-”

Nangong Si hung up, and Mo Ran stared at his phone in shock.

“What does he mean, he’s not been arrested? Does that mean it’s the Ministry of State Security?”

“He said not them either. He said…”

Nangong Si had said something else, more than a month ago. He said that the men dressed as waiters in Rufeng, the men who’d been working for Nangong Xu, had guns that only the police had access to.

If they could get their hands on police *guns*, how much easier would it be to procure police uniforms?

“Mo Ran?”

A voice rang out across the lobby, and Mo Ran dropped his phone on the polished tiles with a clatter.

A tall woman wearing a black fitted suit with a starched shirt of immaculate white clicked across the floor to him. “I heard that you were asking about Chu Wanning?”

Mo Ran scooped up his phone and nodded. “Yeah, um, sorry to bother you, we- We shouldn’t have come, we should go-“

“Please,” she said. She was good-looking, with sharp cheekbones, sharpened further by the severe bun she wore her hair in. “It would actually be of great help to us if you could answer a few questions. I’m the officer in charge of a case involving Chu Wanning.”

Her bright red lipstick parted to show her perfect teeth. “My name is Mu Yanli. Would you be so kind as to step this way?”

Chapter 66: Confess Yourself to Heaven

Mo Ran, for a moment, felt a surge of wild hope. Perhaps their increasingly frantic phone calls had been of use after all.

“Are you looking for him?” Mo Ran said as they followed Officer Mu. “Chu Wanning – is that the case? We thought he was arrested, but someone’s taken him-”

“Not you,” Mu Yanli said to Xue Meng as she buzzed them through a gate. It clanged shut behind them, leaving Xue Meng staring after him.

“Sorry, he’s with me, he’s my cousin-”

“Go back to Wuchang,” she said to Xue Meng, in a voice that brooked no argument. “We'll be going there later. My colleague will show you out.”

“Wait, we’re going back to Wuchang?”

“Later,” she said smoothly, as she led him into a small interview room. She smiled and gestured to a seat at the table. “We’re just in here.”

The last police interview room he’d been in had been years before, the one to which Xue Zhengyong’s private investigator had tracked him down. It sent the old shiver of nerves down his spine, but also sent the more intoxicating ripple of aggression up it. The leaden lightness, the airy heaviness…

Mu Yanli sat down opposite him. “Do you mind if I record this? It means I don’t have to take notes, so it should speed things along.”

Speed was the most important thing at the moment. “Yeah, sure.”

“Thank you.” She clicked a button on the recorder. “Mo Ran, thank you for agreeing to answer some questions for me. Could you please tell me why you’ve come here today, and where you’ve come from?”

“Sure – from Wuchang, last night, because we thought- Chu Wanning is missing, we thought he'd been arrested, but he's been-”

The word was ludicrous, something out of a drama series or a novel.

“He's been kidnapped. Someone's kidnapped him.”

Mu Yanli gave him a cold stare. “You've been ringing various stations several times a day.”

“Like I said, we thought he'd been arrested. His neighbour said that he was, that police came and took him.”

She frowned. “This neighbour- No. Start from the beginning.”

You need to be calm, he heard Chu Wanning’s voice in his mind. *Just as she says. Start from the beginning.*

“My name is Mo Ran. My uncle is Xue Zhengyong, and his best friend is Professor Chu Wanning. Chu Wanning’s my cousin’s doctoral supervisor, and he used to be my tutor. Now he’s my friend.”

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. “I was the student who was injured in the bomb in Wuchang, last February. Chu Wanning saved my life. He was in Shanghai for a few months, in a recovery clinic, and when he came back to Sichuan I picked him up from the train station in Chengdu. On the way back the road was blocked by a landslide, and we ended up spending a week in a tiny place called Yuliang. We kind of became friends then. I went with him to

Linyi, and then everything went down in Rufeng, and… Anyway, we spent a month in Shanghai, to help the police with their investigation into the Rufeng Incident, and for Chu Wanning to get checked over, and we flew back on Sunday the 10th of December, him and me and my aunt and uncle and cousin."

"Did you come back to Wuchang that night?"

"Yes, it was the early flight, so we could drive back."

"Who was driving?"

"My uncle."

"And who did he drop off first? You or Chu Wanning?"

Both of them, at the same flat. "Chu Wanning."

"What time was this?"

"Er, it was dark, but that doesn't say much. Six or seven?"

"And when did you realise that Chu Wanning was missing?"

"The next evening. But his neighbour said that he was arrested in the early afternoon."

Mu Yanli frowned at this. "Arrested?"

“Yes – yes. That’s why we’ve been ringing, but we hadn’t reported him as missing.”

“Do you know his neighbour’s name?”

“Yeah – Zhang Xinyi. She’s around seventy? She lives on the same landing as Chu Wanning, just opposite. They do tai chi together…”

“And *she* said that he’d been arrested?”

“Yeah. Policemen wearing helmets and what sounded like bulletproof vests. But I’ve never seen anyone in Wuchang wearing anything like that. They didn’t show her a badge or anything, and she didn’t see any arm patches. Just ‘Police’ written on the vests and helmets.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know – two or three? She said that she saw them carrying him out between them. With… with a bag over his head.”

“Was he struggling?”

“No.”

“Talking?”

“No. She said he didn’t say anything. They’d used a battering ram and broken the door in, but I should have… He’d always answer the door. They know that; he always goes with you lot quietly. Why’d they bring a battering ram…?”

“If he was being carried, not struggling, not talking, with a bag obscuring his face, he could have been dead already,” Mu Yanli said thoughtfully.

The words struck Mo Ran like bullets.

His world span out of control. With no sun, no orbit, no gravity, it became a flaming comet, screaming through space into the cold void.

“No. No way.”

“Obviously we’ll have to question this Zhang Xinyi ourselves, but at second-hand, there’s no indication that he’s alive-”

“He’s not *fucking dead!*”

His breath felt like lava in his lungs, turning into magma on his tongue. Mo Ran realised suddenly that he was standing up; he’d swept the chair away, and was looming over Mu Yanli. He wanted to strangle her; he wanted to wrap his fingers around her throat and squeeze until she clawed her face open with her pointed nails and her almond eyes popped out of her skull.

She stared up at him. “Sit *down*.”

“Shit. Shit, I’m-” He scrambled for the chair and hauled it up. His hands were shaking. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

“It is my *job* to consider all avenues,” she said. She studied him with narrowed eyes. “If you do that again we will move this to a *far* less comfortable room. Do you understand me?”

Mo Ran closed his eyes and nodded. “He’s not dead, though. He’s *not*. He’s alive, but you need to *find him*.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” she said, and Mo Ran didn’t even care that her voice was cold. Chu Wanning’s voice was cold; he looked severe and indifferent and asked difficult questions, and his soul was pure and his heart was kind. Mo Ran wanted to ask this woman to forgive his mental crimes against her.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and the lava turned to water. “Oh, god, I’m sorry, miss – Officer – Officer Miss Mu, I’m- Someone took him. I thought he’d been arrested, I thought that was all we had to worry about, but someone’s kidnapped him and I don’t know where or who or what they’re-”

“Calm down,” she said emotionlessly.

“But every second we’re in here, whoever took him- you don’t know what they could be doing to him-”

“A search has already begun, Mr. Mo. You were told in response to every one of your- How many was it? Fifty phone calls? – that we had not arrested Chu Wanning. That *you* did not believe the officers of the State does not mean that we've been idle. Once we worked out that he had not been arrested by any of our branches – which took us longer than I'd have liked, I admit – I made the drive here from Chengdu to co-ordinate the investigation. We were in fact going to drive to Wuchang today to move our operation there, but then you appeared right in front of us. For Professor Chu to disappear so soon after the release of the Rufeng Documents is worrying, and the Government want to ensure his safety, lest… aspersions be made.”

Mo Ran’s breath shuddered out. Kidnapped, kidnapped was bad. But the *other thing* was worse. “You’re already looking for him?”

“We are. And as one of the last people to see him, obviously you were at the top of our list to speak to.”

“Sure. Right, yeah.”

“So. The last time that you saw him was when he was dropped off before you at six or seven on Sunday the 10th.”

“Um…” Mo Ran shook his head. “The next morning. Around nine.”

Your duty is here. With me.

Mu Yanli frowned. “You visited in the morning?”

“I stayed the night.”

A dark expression ghosted across her face. Whatever, Mo Ran thought. Let her be a homophobe – the Government wanted Chu Wanning safe, she didn’t have to like them or approve to help find him. Let Chu Wanning be angry about the police knowing about their relationship! Just let him be safe and alive to be angry.

“And your family is… accepting of that?”

“Enough shit’s happened in the last year that it pales in comparison, you know? Accepting enough to drop us both off at his.”

Her lip curled for some reason. “And why did you leave the next morning?”

“We’d only meant to be in Linyi a couple of days, and we ended up away for a month. I needed to check that my flat was still standing. Laundry. I- I was going to make a meal for us that night, so I wanted to get my wok, some food…”

“At least it narrows the window for us,” Mu Yanli said. “At what time did you return?”

“Six-ish. Zhang Xinyi was waiting for me…”

She raised an eyebrow. “She was expecting you?”

“I’d been round a lot all autumn… It was a reasonable guess, that if Chu Wanning was back then I’d be visiting…”

Mu Yanli’s mouth twisted further. “I *see*. What did you do then?”

“I went to the station in Wuchang first. They said they hadn’t arrested him, but I’ve never seen the police in Wuchang wearing helmets or bullet-proof vests. And last time it was the police here in Ya’an who arrested him, back in August…”

“They did not arrest him,” Mu Yanli said, flicking through a report on her tablet. “They didn’t submit an arrest request to a judge.”

Mo Ran ground his teeth. “They *took him into custody*. They kept him for two nights.”

“As they had every right to,” Mu Yanli said, and a new chill prickled across Mo Ran’s scalp. “But back to the disappearance. What did you do after you visited the station?”

“I made some calls. My uncle. Chu Wanning’s lawyer. A friend in Beijing. The PSB here…”

“What is the name of your friend in Beijing?”

Mo Ran shifted. “Well-”

“We can pull the records if we need to.”

Mo Ran bit the inside of his cheek. “Nangong Si. He is a friend of Chu Wanning’s too.”

“Where did you make these calls from?”

“While I was walking back to Chu Wanning’s flat. I also called out a carpenter, who said he could come round in the morning, to replace the door that had been smashed in.”

“Why did you go back to the flat?”

“His door was gone. I wanted to guard it until the carpenter came, make sure that no one came in and stole anything…”

Mu Yanli frowned at him. “So… someone tells you that your boyfriend has been kidnapped-”

“Arrested.”

“Not arrested.”

“Fine, taken into custody.”

“- and you waited in his flat all night and did nothing?”

Mo Ran felt a scream building up in his lungs like steam in a kettle. “Why should I have done?”

Mu Yanli didn’t answer him. “What did you do all night?”

“Er… just sat there, mostly. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Did you do any cleaning?”

“Cleaning? No, I don’t think so – it wasn’t very messy. I mean, I tidied the stairwell on my way up – I’d just dropped all the food on the landing and run out. I tried ringing here a few more times.”

“I have a note of them. 7:14, 7:37, then nothing until 6:05 the next morning.”

“I thought that was when there would be a new shift. I might have better luck getting an answer.”

“And Zhang Xinyi?”

“I think she went to stay at a friend’s house. She was pretty shaken.”

“Did anyone climb the stairs that night? Anyone go past?”

“No, Chu Wanning’s on the top floor.”

“Mn.”

Mo Ran’s heart skipped a beat. “But there’s CCTV in the building. It’ll show I didn’t leave.”

“Will it.” Mu Yanli studied him. “Unless the CCTV in the building was short-circuited at 13:02 on the 11th.”

It made sense, that anyone with access to vans and police equipment would also know to ensure they weren't seen on CCTV. But it meant that only Zhang Xinyi was a witness to the abduction, and Mo Ran had no alibi for the night of the kidnapping.

"My phone – the phone data will show where I was."

"The phone data will show where your phone was," Mu Yanli corrected him. "I'd like to discuss something else for a moment."

"No, no, I want- What are you implying?"

"In this room, Mr. Mo, I ask the questions. I'd like to turn the clock back a few months-"

"No, I *didn't do this*!" Mo Ran knew it, he *knew it*, and he'd let Chu Wanning make him soft, make him believe the best in people. This Mu Yanli wasn't another Chu Wanning; she was a *fucking cop*. "You're going to be completely fixated on me because of when I was a kid, but the *actual bastards who did this* are out there! And you're wasting your time with me!"

"You had the means and the opportunity to kill Chu Wanning," Mu Yanli said, and Mo Ran could have laughed until he was sick, "but perhaps you'd care to enlighten me as to the motive."

"I didn't kill him. First, because *he's not dead*, and second, because I- I would never hurt him. I saved his life, in Rufeng – why would I do that, if I wanted to hurt him?"

"A lot can change in a month. Perhaps he discovered something about you… And I would advise you not to lie to me."

"I'm not lying!"

“You said that you would never hurt Chu Wanning. I’d like to go back a few months, to the end of January.”

Mo Ran shook his head.

Mu Yanli ignored him, and tapped open her tablet. “Normally CCTV has to be retained for six months, but we stored everything we could find in Wuchang in 2023 because of the bomb which you were both caught in. I’d like to spend a little time in the period between the Lunar New Year and the explosi-”

“I drugged him,” Mo Ran said.

She blinked. “What?”

“I drugged him. On the- When was it? I think it was the 25th of January – after New Year’s Day, but well before the Lantern Festival. We ate early at Ni’er’s, finished at around eight, walked down Luding Street to the Sichuan Whiskey Bar. I was wearing a black leather jacket, he was wearing a beige trench coat over a blue jumper, we’ll be on camera all the way. I don’t know if you’ve got footage from inside the bar, but I poured a drug into his drink when he went to the bathroom, at about half eight, and then I pulled him into the street at around nine. I kissed him. I groped him. I don’t know what crime exactly it is, I mean, what the lawyers call it, but I did it. I’m confessing to it right now.”

Mu Yanli looked at the tape recorder and then back at Mo Ran. Her mouth was open.

“He had a seizure on Gongga Street. I carried him back to my flat. I didn’t bring him to the hospital. I don’t know what the drug was, I bought it from a guy in Ya’an, called the International Club or something, on Kangzang Road, on the north side of the Ya’an Bridge. He said it was a new strain of poppers. I’d never have- I asked if it was Rohypnol or GHB or something and he said no, just strong poppers. Not that it matters. Chu Wanning’s never used drugs. I’d bet my life that he has no idea what poppers *are*. He had no idea what happened. He thought the drinks had been mixed badly. I told him that he’d been drugged, but not that I’d drugged him, and he didn’t remember what else I did to him. The kissing. The touching.”

A tear splattered on the metal table, swiftly followed by a second, then a third. “I don’t know what crime it counts as,” Mo Ran croaked. “Harassment or assault or humiliation – whatever you want, I’ll plead guilty to it. Whatever drug crimes you want. But I didn’t kill him. And if you- if you fixate on the idea that I- I ki-”

His shoulders heaved. “Please believe me. I didn’t kill him. I would *never* hurt him again, not in a million years. Someone took him, and you need to *find him*.”

Mu Yanli had closed her mouth; her lips were a thin, scarlet line. “Why did you do it?”

Mo Ran sobbed, once, and then coughed, dashing the tears away from his eyes. “I was so fucking stupid. I was in love – *thought* I was in love – with another student, another of Chu Wanning’s doctoral students. Shi Mingjing, but me and my cousin, we called him Shi Mei. I came into the lab one morning and he was really upset. Then Chu Wanning came in and said that he could no longer supervise him, that he didn’t know enough about biomechanics or whatever, and Chu Wanning was going to transfer him to another supervisor here in Ya’an, this guy called Hua Binan.”

Mu Yanli jerked her head. “What does all this have to do with it?”

“I’m telling you! I drove Shi Mei to Ya’an, and he told me that Chu Wanning had made a move on him. Tried to kiss him. Told him that if he didn’t let Chu Wanning do what he wanted then he’d kick him out of the lab. Then, lo and behold, Shi Mei’s out. But Shi Mei didn’t want to report it – it’d be one against one, and he thought that everyone would believe the professor. Especially because Chu Wanning’s famous for being so incorruptible, you know? So I thought that if he could do it to another student, it’d support Shi Mei’s accusation, and we could get him fired. Destroy his reputation…”

Drag him down into the filth and the dirt, where Mo Ran existed. Prove that Chu Wanning wasn’t perfect, wasn’t pure and innocent – no one was, no one was good, no one had integrity. Everyone was a liar and a predator, everyone out for himself, as Mo Ran had always thought. The last immaculate soul had died with his mother.

“So I befriended him. It took two months before he’d so much as eat in a restaurant with me, and that night was the night I… Then there was the bomb. Chu Wanning saved my life. And I learnt that Shi Mei had lied. My cousin had the evidence on video. It had been the other way

around: Shi Mei had assaulted Chu Wanning, he'd shoved him up against the whiteboard in his office and kissed him. Sending him to Ya'an was an act of mercy, not punishment. And I realised what a fucking piece of shit I'd been."

He looked up at Mu Yanli, silently pleading with her to believe him. "So I'd never hurt him again. I owe him my life. I owe him- I thought he'd been arrested, like he was back in August – sorry, I'm sorry, taken into custody. But I should have- When all the Rufeng stuff came out-"

He was losing track of his words. He was losing track of himself. The image of Chu Wanning's body somewhere kept resurfacing in his mind, a corpse in black water, and it was becoming more and more difficult to breathe.

Officer Mu was looking at him with narrowed eyes and a twisted mouth, and Mo Ran knew that she must think that he was the greatest scumbag on earth.

He didn't care. He slid out of his chair and knelt in front of her.

"Please. Just find him. Save him."

Chapter 67: The Nadir

Chapter Notes

> Omgggg, another chapter when I have to beg for your forgiveness! First for how long it took, and second and more importantly, for not replying to your comments! Work was super stressful, and we had a general election (first left-wing government in 14 years! Ahhhhhh!!! 😭🌹), and overall it's just been A LOT. But I thought a chapter might be more appreciated than replies, even though I love replying and chatting in the comments. I am always so, so grateful, I can't even say. ❤️
>
> Then again, this chapter might not be more appreciated after all...
>
> Basically, for the end, you have to blame Meatbun! She's the one who included that, not me!

“You’re allowed to go in there, you know. You haven’t taken a turn.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You’ve changed your tune.”

“It feels wrong, it feels-”

“Did the rest of it not feel wrong? Did the rest of it give you no qualms?”

“Not like this. Come on, you *know* it’s not the same.”

“Squeamishness isn’t innocence. Denying yourself now isn’t going to make you any less complicit. You might as well enjoy it.”

“I *won’t* enjoy it. I *can’t*. It’s not even- I don’t *like* that.”

“You did it first.”

“It’s not the same! No, no, *ge*, it’s fucking not. I honestly thought he might… It was…”

“That he’d forget all about Mo Ran and fall into your arms? That he’d suddenly realise his true love had been right in front of him all along? Or that he’d just invite you to fuck him over his desk?”

“Why are you being like this? Why are you being like this to both of us?”

Because Hua Binan was flagging, Chu Wanning thought wearily, in response to the plaintive voice beyond the open door. It was taking him longer and longer to reach climax. Longer and longer for him to recover after each rape, too. And, once, his erection had failed.

Hua Binan had noticed him noticing it, and had punched him instead of slapping him. That had reinvigorated it, and they had both learnt something about what this would be like going forward.

That was the ideal role of a supervisor, he thought with quiet delirium from a hundred miles away: to provide a safe space for the student and to guide them in making their own discoveries. Yes. What an excellent supervisor he was…

This was the worst point, Chu Wanning thought, when the drugs were at their lowest, and his lucidity was at its peak. He could feel his brain creaking under the strain just like the bedstead underneath them. *The prudent text-books give it in tables at the end*... The ache in his pelvis was almost unbearable, and he couldn’t move his legs to gain any reprieve. Cramping abdominal muscles, bruised buttocks, torn skin.

He blinked, and came back to the room. Existence now was balanced on an unsteady fulcrum, and he slid this way and that from moment to moment; sometimes drifting miles

away, sometimes clinically observing his body from outside itself, sometimes trapped deep within the fibres of his aching muscles or abused insides.

Sometimes in the past, watching it in its cold new light.

Sometimes wherever Mo Ran was.

He suspected that half or more of Hua Binan's pleasure now came not from possessing Chu Wanning, but from keeping him from Mo Ran.

He blinked again, came back again. The door opened, and Chu Wanning refused to turn his head to see who had won the argument.

"I've bought some lemon tea; I thought a change might…"

Hardly a surprise, the winner and the loser.

"Come into my office, Shi Mingjing," Chu Wanning said, with a petty refusal to look at him, "or is it Hua Mingjing?"

"Shi Mingjing is fine, Chu-*laoshi*."

Chu Wanning couldn't help but flinch at that. *That* pierced him in a way that Hua Binan's latest attempt couldn't compare to; it felt like a knife sliding between his ribs. He opened his eyes in an attempt to hide it.

"Don't worry," said Shi Mingjing. "I'm not going to…"

Chu Wanning waited for a second. "… rape me?"

Shi Mingjing grimaced. He perched on the side of the bed. “Can I get you anything to make you more comfortable?”

“You can let me go.”

Shi Mingjing sighed. He placed the Master Kong bottle on the bedside table, and Chu Wanning saw his eyes dart down the length of the bed. He cleared his throat and, looking away, delicately twitched the hem of the robe to preserve Chu Wanning’s modesty. “Are you cold?”

He felt as though someone was taking a razorblade to his face. “Fuck off.”

“I’ll get you a blanket,” Shi Mingjing said. He spread it over him, and Chu Wanning suspected it was more out of a desire to hide the restraints and straps rather than out of concern.

He tugged at them so that Shi Mingjing would have to hear them instead. “The others used to call you Shi Mei.”

Shi Mingjing looked tired. “You never did,” he said softly.

“No. I had the feeling that you disliked it. That you found it emasculating, but were too afraid of conflict to mention it. That, or it was a welcome nickname that I was not party to. Either way, it would have been inappropriate. Although nothing about this situation is appropriate, so perhaps I should call you that instead.”

“If you like. Do you want some tea?”

“No. I told you. I want you to fuck off.”

Shi Mingjing's mouth twisted; it gave him a slightly prudish look. "I can't. I have to…"

"Look upon your works, ye mighty, and despair?" Chu Wanning closed his eyes again. "What day is it?"

"Saturday."

"I mean the date."

"The 16th."

That made him open his eyes. He knew that time had passed, but so much? Had he already lost so much of his grip on reality? "The 16th of January?"

"Of December."

Oh. That was so much worse.

Only six days. How had only six days passed? It felt like six weeks.

He hated Shi Mingjing's presence, tangible to his raw skin; he hated the dip on the left side of the bed that his weight caused; he hated the smell of soap and washed clothing.

He hated the memories that Shi Mingjing brought with him, the consciousness of who he had been.

"I don't understand. I don't understand why… Engineering. You never enjoyed it. I thought you were just not very gifted, but it's because you had no interest in it. Did he plant you in my lab?"

“He knew you’d take me in, if I said everyone else had refused,” Shi Mingjing said in a flat voice.

“But *why*?”

“So I could report… He said we had to wait, until Nangong Xu could kill our father, and he could steal the money from Guyueye. All I had to do was stay in your lab. Do well enough not to be kicked out, but not so well…”

“Not so well you actually finished your thesis. That’s why your first project…” He didn’t want to think about the lab. He didn’t want to think about Shi Mingjing, Xue Meng, and Mo Ran laughing over lunch, going drinking together after labs. Mo Ran flirting so shamelessly in front of him…

“How could you do this to Mo Ran?” he asked. “He worships you.”

He didn’t know how he could say it without his voice breaking. Every syllable was like a knife twisting in his heart.

“Mo Ran. Why are you concerned for *him*?” It was Shi Mingjing’s voice which broke instead. “After everything he did to you, *that’s* what you ask? How could I do this to *Mo Ran*?”

“You knew he’d do anything you asked of him, and you used his trust to corrupt him,” Chu Wanning snarled, and the rage felt cleansing. “Like your drug-peddling brother. And now you’re going to have him sent to prison, force him into crime and frame him and- At least Nangong Xu knew and admitted what he was, but you two – you’re both just like your father. Using the law like a weapon.”

“Don’t!” Shi Mingjing pointed his finger at Chu Wanning, and Chu Wanning laughed; the gesture was so alien to his mental perception of Shi Mingjing, always so gentle and humble

and placid and submissive, that the filthy absurdity of it all shocked the half-sobbing sound out of him.

"Or what? Or what, Shi Mingjing? Go on. Complete the paternal metamorphosis." The laugh shattered like glass. "Do you have any idea, how precious a thing you were given? And you twisted it and used it. I hate you more than your brother."

"Why?" Shi Mingjing's expression was finally as dark as Hua Binan's. "Because Mo Ran preferred me?"

"No," Chu Wanning said. "No. That's a lie. That hurt. But it's because I worried about you. What your brother does to me, however humiliating, however disgusting, however painful it is, I know what it is. I know the rot is in him. But *you*… I spent a year wondering what I'd done, to make you do that to me. I thought that maybe you thought my help was contingent on it. That's why I let you go to Ya'an instead, because I thought that I was responsible for it. I felt so guilty. But you were both- I was so stupid."

Shi Mingjing's eyes were full of tears now, and the hatred in Chu Wanning's heart solidified.

"And now you're crying. *You* are crying." And now, even now, strapped to a bed stained with blood and semen, *Chu Wanning* felt like the villain, flinging cruel barbs at the soft, sweet, long-suffering Shi Mingjing.

"You pushed me away!" Shi Mingjing replied. "You pushed *me*- No one had ever pushed *me* away. And all for Mo Ran, an idiot who hated you. So I wanted to show you what he was really like. And A-Nan, he said we could work with it – if you fell for it then you'd be more isolated, and if you didn't- If you didn't then at least we'd show you what a piece of shit *you'd* thrown *yourself* away on."

"Why? Before your manipulations, what did he do to make you hate him so much?"

"Do you have any idea how *annoying* it was?"

"*'Annoying'*?" Chu Wanning whispered.

"Trailing around after me like a puppy, with his clumsy compliments and his… You'd spend hours with him, so you'd then spend yet more hours afterwards doing your actual work. You'd sleep in your office while he went out drinking, flirting with me. And once- You know his mother died of BBS? That's what he said. I asked if he was a carrier then, but no. He didn't… He had no idea how *lucky* he was, to have your attention, to have a life expectancy beyond forty, to go to the gym and get drunk and fuck random guys without a care in the world, and all the time you and I, *we*-"

"'We' – what 'we'? You and Hua Binan are a 'we', not you and me." Chu Wanning's lip curled in contempt. "You are both a thousand times worse than Mo Ran. You're not worthy to be under the sole of his shoe." He turned his face away. "Get out of my sight. I'd rather see your brother."

"You don't mean that. Chu-*laoshi*…"

"I do. You sicken me. Your brother is sick, but you are sickening."

Chu Wanning heard Shi Mingjing inhale at that. He felt the bed rise as Shi Mingjing stood, and heard the door open – but too soon, too soon for Shi Mingjing to have reached the door-

"Hold his jaw shut and cover his mouth," Hua Binan said hurriedly. "No, *jie*, I'm still here! I'm, er, let me put you on speaker and say that again!"

In the second that Chu Wanning registered that Hua Binan was on the phone, staring down at him with gleaming eyes, Shi Mingjing had gagged him with both hands. He could barely breathe, but it didn't matter; his entire being was focused on the phone.

"I said he confessed to drugging and assaulting him, A-Nan. Dates, times, locations – even what they were wearing. We're about to drive to Wuchang, so if there's video evidence then we'll get it. I can talk to the judge right now for a maximum of eight years, but we won't get that."

Mo Ran had confessed. *Mo Ran had confessed*. He'd known what they were talking about – he'd known the date and the location.

Mo Ran was the man in the purple light, who slammed his head back against a brick wall. It was impossible to believe, but he had confessed.

Hua Binan frowned. "Eight years?"

"Three years maximum for Article 353: Those who lure, instigate, or trick others into taking or injecting drugs. The problem is that whatever you gave him isn't actually on any narcotics list, nor do we have any kind of toxicology report. He *says he thought it was an amyl nitrate, which is legal. Without* mens rea *it'll be hard to prove a crime, and we don't have the drug or any evidence of it. The most we could realistically hope for is five years from Article 237, and that'll be hard without your friend testifying. It'll be a fine."*

Chu Wanning hadn't struggled like this since the first night of the ordeal; Shi Mingjing had to lean his weight across him to try to silence him further.

"But what about murder?" Hua Binan said, looking down at Chu Wanning. "Murder is execution."

"There's no corpus delicti *for murder."*

"Corpus – a body?"

"A body of evidence, but yes, it's exponentially harder to prove murder without a body too. To prove that someone committed a crime, you first have to prove that a crime has been committed. And we just don't have the time to fabricate that kind of evidence, especially not if I'm under scrutiny for taking a fuerdai *into custody."*

“I thought you could hold him without making an official arrest for thirty-seven days?”

“Technically, it’s possible, but we’d have to apply for an extension after 72 hours, and every two days after that. A missing person is not enough to justify suspicion of murder, especially if he confessed so readily to something else.”

“It has to be murder.”

“Unless your friend is willing to die to fake his death? You have to be realistic, A-Nan.”

Hua Binan was frowning. “What else would count? Instead of a body?”

“Mmph!” The woman on the phone seemed to think that Chu Wanning was in on this; if he could communicate to her somehow, cast any kind of doubt-

Hua Binan picked up the syringe of succinylcholine with his free hand and set the point of the needle to Chu Wanning’s throat.

“Clothing. Something people would recognise. And blood. A lot *of blood. We’re talking sodden, not stained. And they’ll never execute without a body. It’ll be life imprisonment.”*

“That’d do. I still have contacts. Once he’s inside, he’ll be easy to kill.”

“Mn!” Chu Wanning felt the heat of the needle score across the skin of his neck; Hua Binan pulled the needle away and covered the receiver of the phone.

“A-Jing, *keep him quiet* – no, *jie*, sorry, the signal here is so bad, let me go outside and try to get a better one…”

The door closed, and Shi Mingjing stepped back; Chu Wanning drew a breath like fire, lungs clawing up out of his throat in a desperate search of oxygen. “Let me go!”

“I can’t.”

“You have to let me go! Shi Mingjing, please!”

Shi Mingjing’s chin trembled. “You said I sickened you.”

“I’m sorry!” He had no face left to save; he threw the remnants of his mask onto the fire of Shi Mingjing’s ego. “I was wrong, I lashed out – please, *please*, whatever you and your brother want to do, I’ll do it. I’ll do it. You don’t need to keep me strapped here, I’ll stay willingly! But don’t let him kill Mo Ran. He loves you! You were his friend! You can’t!”

“I can’t,” Shi Mingjing said, backing out of the room, but Chu Wanning didn’t know whether he was agreeing with him or repeating himself.

“Please! I’m begging you! Shi Mingjing!”

Shi Mingjing fled, and Chu Wanning swallowed a scream. He put his energy into bucking against the restraints instead; he’d never have a chance of tearing the polyester webbing, but perhaps he could buckle the D rings or break part of the bed.

But the strap across his chest gave him only an inch in which to move, and he was weak after the abuse his body had been put through, the lack of food, the steady stream of sedatives. He heard a creak or a clank, some movement of metal, but didn’t feel any corresponding shift.

Hua Binan stormed back into the room, and gave Chu Wanning a slap that made his head reel. “I’ve half a mind to inject you anyway.”

“Do it! Do whatever you want!” Chu Wanning didn’t know whether he was snarling or pleading. “Hua Binan – Binan*, A-Nan* – just let him go. I’ll stay here forever, I’ll do better, I’ll learn!”

Hua Binan slapped him again. “Always him! And you’d always be thinking about *him*, enduring it for *him*! No. Once he’s dead, we’ll have closure, and you can move on.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “Never. If you kill him I will never, *never* forgive you.”

“Nothing you can say or do can save him now,” Hua Binan said. He loomed over Chu Wanning, and his face was twisted in disgust. “You’re so… pathetic. *Pathetic*. I always thought that you were my only equal. We were better than everyone else. Only you were my equal in intelligence, in dignity, in clarity, in the ruthless pursuit of a goal, but for *him*... For him you’re begging like a kicked dog. I thought you were different, but you… You have disappointed me so much.”

Blind with rage, Chu Wanning did the only thing he could: he spat in Hua Binan’s face.

Hua Binan raised his hand. It shook, and the spit ran down his cheek. Then he lowered it.

“No. I won’t punish you for the first glimpse you’ve given me of the old Chu Wanning. The first truth you’ve offered.” His voice was very soft. “Be honest with me. You just heard that he confessed. He hated you. He drugged you. How does that make you feel?”

“I don’t care.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying,” Chu Wanning said. “If it’s truth you want, Hua Binan, you’re a mediocrity with a vastly inflated opinion of yourself. If you really wanted to frame Mo Ran for my murder, you’d never have put on that show for my neighbour. You overthought it, created too narrow a window. You wouldn’t have needed to buy those lackeys’ help in the first place.

Even your sister is sick of your half-baked ideas and lack of comprehension. And I don't give a damn what Mo Ran did. I love him. I forgive him. You will never make me hate him, and you will never make me love you."

"Then we're at an impasse. You can't save him, and I can't change your mind." Hua Binan's voice was very calm, but his hands were shaking. "Maybe I shouldn't kill him. Maybe I'll get him to come here, and he can have a go on you as well. Maybe I made a mistake. Maybe it's the action that matters, rather than the person, hmm? Then we'd see if you still loved him if he was the one doing this."

"Hua Binan," Chu Wanning said. "If it were him doing this to me… I think part of me would enjoy it."

The smug sneer slid off Hua Binan's face. He stood up, and for a second Chu Wanning thought that he was about to cry like his younger brother. Then he turned, and walked slowly towards the door, out into whatever was beyond.

He allowed himself a single moment of satisfaction, that perhaps he had managed to hurt Hua Binan even the tiniest fraction of how Hua Binan had hurt him.

Mo Ran. Mo Ran… Hua Binan was never going to let him go. He was going to kill him, sooner rather than later – he'd realised the old truth that wanting was often a greater pleasure than having, and soon Chu Wanning's body would give him more pleasure as a corpse, as a weapon against his rival, than as a captive.

Chu Wanning turned his attention back to the restraints, back to his struggles and the examination of every minute noise, back to his single-minded need to free himself.

Then Hua Binan strode back into the room, carrying a long, thin candlestick.

"Let's see how you enjoy this."

Chapter 68: The Candle and the Candlestick

"There's no time; I have to get there, find somewhere to bury it without anyone seeing, and back before dawn. For fuck's sake, where is it? It was in this drawer, Mingjing, I put it in here!"

"If we ever have a drinking competition, I'll make sure you take some of your prop-whatever to even the odds."

"I've already emptied it out, *dage*; look, it's definitely not in here. We'll find it tomorrow, it's too late now to go there and back."

"Let me get you another one. It's really hot in here."

"No. They have to find evidence *tomorrow* to apply for the extension, and that's already past the deadline, she said. Where the hell- It must be back in there somehow. He must have hidden it!"

"Who else would it be? Huh? Who else do you think I'd be? Shi Mei?"

"How, *dage*? He's not been… The last couple of days- Besides, you said you saw it yesterday. The necklace is too small anyway, it won't be noticed. The jumper's the important thing – it's got the CNSA logo and the blood."

"That's never stopped you before, has it?"

The blood… Ah, yes. A bowl of blood. His blood, extracted painstakingly slowly... The iron-sweet, rotting smell of it. Enough blood flowing to float pestles. The ruins of the jumper had been soaking in it. Yes, he remembered it now.

Maybe that's why he felt so cold and dizzy. Not enough blood inside. Dripping from him into the bowl, just like the radical: a sacrifice to placate the gods. All of his love for Huaizui had poured out of his chest. There hadn't been a bowl then.

A drop of blood. Of course. That was the necklace that Hua Binan was tearing the house apart in search of. A blood of blood on his chest, to match the one on Mo Ran's…

Where would he even hide it? Ludicrous. They'd have taken the necklace from Mo Ran when they processed him. Put him in a cell.

His breath hitched at the thought, and something cold and wet ran into his ear. Why was everything so cold? The air, the straps around his wrists, the fabric of the mattress. All so cold it made his teeth chatter.

It was December, so the cell would be cold, especially if Hua Binan's sister had brought Mo Ran back to Wuchang. Mo Ran burnt hot – would that help him? Or would they not give him enough food, to feed the furnace of his body? In Yuliang the old ladies had exclaimed over how much he ate, how quickly, while Chu Wanning sifted through each meal. Not like Shi Mingjing, who gratefully ate whatever was in front of him.

Picky. Fussy. Arrogant and entitled, just like Huaizui had said.

"I don't mean to be," he entreated. "I don't know how to be different…"

Outside, a car door slammed, and Chu Wanning's body jumped; it tried to move away from the door, before his mind caught up and stilled it in embarrassment.

As if the thing hadn't betrayed him enough already.

He was shivering himself to sleep when the door really was thrown open, and his cowardly body attempted its futile fleeing again.

“No, no, it’s all right, it’s me, it’s me,” someone said, and Chu Wanning blinked. Hua Binan’s face turned into Shi Mingjing’s.

“No,” he said, and turned his face away. He couldn’t cope with Shi Mingjing now either, his beautiful peach-blossom eyes filled with tears, the face that had made him feel so angry and so scared for a year, but now felt like a lesser evil. *That* felt wrong. “Go away. Go away.”

“I’m getting you out of here,” Shi Mingjing said, and Chu Wanning felt his fingers on the restraints around his wrists.

“No!”

Shi Mingjing clasped his face in his hands, and it was *wrong*, only *Mo Ran* could do that, Shi Mingjing’s hands were freezing cold and *wrong*. “Chu-*laoshi*!”

Laoshi. Laoshi. He stretched his fingers, clenched his fists, and blinked forcefully. *Laoshi*. He was dizzy and tired and cold, but if someone was calling him by that title… That was him, he knew, even if he didn’t believe it anymore. Shi Mingjing needed a *laoshi*…

The same Shi Mingjing was supporting him in sitting up from the bed; white-hot pain jolted from his pelvis to his spine, and his limbs cramped. Only fury kept him from crying out – he exhaled sharply, but nothing else.

“I’ve got clothes – can you dress? I can try to carry you-”

“I can dress,” Chu Wanning slurred. Pain brought lucidity, and the memory of being hanged – agony had tied with clarity then as well. “I can… Clothes?”

“Here,” said Shi Mingjing. Chu Wanning tried to see the clothes placed in his hands, but every sensation demanded equal attention from him, and the pain leeched every other sense

of colour. He had always lived in a surfeit of colour: every character, note, sensation. But this pain, the deep crimson of it, superseded all other senses. Every muscle ached, every inch of skin was frozen, and deep within there was pure agony in every movement.

His limbs were weak, and they shook as he maneuvered them into black joggers and a jumper of pale teal. Shi Mingjing tried to help him, and Chu Wanning used energy he did not have to bat his hand away. But when he tried to bend over to ease his feet into some shoes, he went blind and deaf, the pain in his lower abdomen was so intense.

"Sorry, sorry," Shi Mingjing muttered beneath him, guiding his feet into the too-big trainers. "We have to hurry, if he comes back-"

"Where is he going? Wuchang?" Chu Wanning asked, struggling to stay conscious, struggling to remember and order what he'd heard.

"Some village, to plant the jumper. I'm going to take you to Ya'an, okay? To the hospital."

"No. Wuchang."

"Chu-*laoshi*, you need a doctor-"

"No. Wuchang."

"And if I refuse?"

Chu Wanning tried to focus on Shi Mingjing – or, at least, the one of the two that he thought was Mingjing. "Then I'll walk."

The two Shi Mingjings looked up to heaven. "You can't *stand*."

“And what if this is all part of his plan?” Chu Wanning slurred. “What if this is to- to make me hope? So he can see me when- Or… Or. No. No, he’s… He’s picked the spot, hasn’t he? And you’re going to drive me there.”

“No!”

“Less likely to be noticed moving a willing passenger to a shallow grave than a dead weight.”

“I’m *rescuing* you,” Shi Mingjing said, and Chu Wanning shoved his helping hand away.

“I want my phone. If you’re really rescuing me.”

“He has it.”

“Your phone, then.”

“To what? Call the police? No.”

“A knife.”

Shi Mingjing stared at him for a moment. He sighed. “You can have a knife.”

What would he even do with it? He doubted he had the ability to plunge a knife into Shi Mingjing’s chest. Hua Binan’s… Hua Binan’s, possibly. But if Shi Mingjing was actually driving him to be killed and buried, he knew deep down he’d not be able to stab him.

Something was moving on the floor. Chu Wanning blinked, and focused on it.

The brass candlestick was sketching a bloody arc on the concrete floor.

Had he been physically able to, he'd have jumped back from the evil thing. His fingers scrambled on the mattress, seeking in vain for sheets to twist.

The narrow end was black with blood. The wide base was smeared and wet.

Though the chills and the sweat and the scalp-prickling terror, Chu Wanning forced himself to *think*.

"And a plastic bag!" he shouted – or croaked, more accurately. He watched the candlestick roll, slow and sinister, for another nineteen degrees, until Shi Mingjing came back in.

"Why a plastic bag?"

Chu Wanning pointed.

Shi Mingjing gagged. "No, Chu-*laoshi.*"

"I'll do it then," Chu Wanning said, and tried to work out how to kneel on the floor with the least amount of pain. "Bag."

"*Why?*"

"Evidence." He sneered at Shi Mingjing. "If you're going to bury me, you might as well bury the weapon too."

"I'm not…" Shi Mingjing looked close to tears, and Chu Wanning felt the sick stab of guilt again. But it worked: Shi Mingjing bent down and picked up the candlestick using the plastic

bag, turning it inside out to wrap it and secure it.

The candlestick felt radioactive, as heavy as if it were made of uranium. That would explain why his body felt like this. Why would Hua Binan have a candlestick made of uranium? The plastic bag wouldn't help shield them at all…

Still, it helped calm his fluttering heart just a little, to cradle the kitchen knife as well on the long, excruciating walk to the car parked outside. Sheer willpower kept his soul anchored in the body he piloted. It felt like a hydraulic machine drained of water, and as much as he hated it, Shi Mingjing was half-carrying him.

Chu Wanning once would have said it hurt his pride. But it didn't. He had no pride left. No pride, no dignity, no stoicism; just pain, and blood running down the inside of his legs.

Shi Mingjing helped him to sit, and the pain made him pass out; in one moment he was outside the farmhouse, and the next, the sky behind them was turning grey.

Next to him, Shi Mingjing indicated a packet of pills in the drinks well. "There's some painkillers there."

Chu Wanning ignored him.

"They're in a blister pack. They're just paracetamol and ibuprofen; anything with codeine wouldn't… Wouldn't be very good for you right now."

"Your brother bought a 1970s pu'erh press," Chu Wanning said. "I'm sure a blister pack isn't beyond him."

"Why would-?" Shi Mingjing bit off the end of the question, as he thought it through. "I promise. On my mother's grave."

“Forgive me if I think the memory of your mother has been disrespected of late,” Chu Wanning replied.

They spent the rest of the drive in silence. It was disturbed only once, when Shi Mingjing’s phone started ringing; he took it out of his pocket, looked at who was calling, and then turned it off.

The sky was white when they entered Wuchang at about ten o’clock, a portent of coming snow. The streets were quiet as Shi Mingjing parked across the road from Wuchang’s small police station. Its dedicated carpark was full, and there was a large number of officers lingering outside, smoking and chatting.

“What day is it?” Chu Wanning asked quietly.

“Tuesday. The 19th. Forgive me for not dropping you at the door.”

“I understand.”

“How are you feeling?” Shi Mingjing asked.

Terrible. The last of the sedative had worn off, and Chu Wanning’s head was clear. But even with the heating on he felt freezing cold, and his whole body felt wet with sweat and blood. He glanced in the rearview mirror; his face was white between the bruises, his lips were cracked, his eyes were ringed with shadows, and his hair was loose and lank.

“I’ll be fine. It’s not a long walk.” He leant forward, gritting his teeth against the wave of pain in his pelvis, placed the knife on the dashboard, and opened the door. “… be careful.”

“I’ll try.” Shi Mingjing said. His knuckles were pale as he gripped the steering wheel. “I’ll, um.”

“Mn.” Chu Wanning stood up, and blacked out. But he caught himself on the door, and managed to stay standing. He refused to thank Shi Mingjing, but he couldn’t help but nod at him before he slammed the door shut again.

One thing. He had to stay alive and upright for long enough to do just one thing. Then he could collapse. Then he could rest. Hopefully, then, he could die.

One thing. One foot in front of the other. Left. Agony. Right. Agony. Left. Agony. Right. Agony.

He kept his back straight and his chin up, vaguely aware that he was shambling in Shi Mingjing’s too-big shoes. The first police office noticed him and started pointing and shouting; Chu Wanning focused on his goal, the door.

“That’s him! That’s him, that’s Chu Wanning!”

“Tell Officer Mu we’ve found him!”

“The car – did anyone take note of the car?!”

“Don’t touch me,” Chu Wanning said to the first man to reach him. His grip on the plastic-wrapped candlestick tightened. “Don’t touch me.”

Officer Mu. She’d kept her father’s name.

His hand shook on the door-plate as he pushed his way into the station. His knees felt as though they were about to buckle. One foot in front of the other.

Then he nearly collapsed, because Xue Zhengyong and Zhu Ruoxuan, his lawyer, were waiting at the reception desk, clearly mid-argument with the officer on duty. A sliver of Chu

Wanning felt relief; he could give the candlestick to them, and no one would dare take it off them. But the rest of his soul felt humiliation wash over it like a tsunami.

"Yuheng! Oh god, oh my god, you're all right – look! Look at him, you've been tormenting my nephew and he's alive – Yuheng, sit down, what happened?"

"Don't touch me," Chu Wanning gasped, pulling his arm out of reach. "Don't touch me!"

Xue Zhengyong looked terrified; he held his hands up. "I won't. Yuheng-"

"I need to see Officer Mu," Chu Wanning said to the officer on the desk.

"Mu Yanli?" said Zhu Ruoxuan. "How did you-?"

Chu Wanning flapped his hand. Extra words, extra pain, extra thoughts. He couldn't afford to be overwhelmed. "Right now."

"Where have you been?!" Xue Zhengyong cried. "We've been so worried – they said it was a murder investigation, they said Mo Ran *killed you*!"

"*They* said? Or *she* said?" Chu Wanning refused to make eye contact. He had to stay cold. He had to stay standing.

Word must have already reached Mu Yanli, because there was a loud buzzing before she threw a door open and skidded through it. Her jaw dropped when she saw him.

Chu Wanning smiled at her.

He handed the plastic-wrapped candlestick to Zhu Ruoxuan. They would be less likely to take it off Xue Zhengyong, but he couldn't bear the thought of his friend's kind hands on the thing.

"Do not open this. Do not touch it. Do not let anyone take it. If I do not come out within ten minutes, *then* you can open it." Then he turned back to Mu Yanli. "Let's talk."

Stopping had robbed him of momentum, and he struggled to move again. He had lead in his veins, not blood; no, it felt like the little blood left in him was obscenely soaking his trousers, sticking the polyester to his skin. The chills were becoming more violent, and he suddenly realised that he had a fever.

Irrelevant. He only needed ten minutes. If he couldn't do it in ten minutes, then it couldn't be done.

Mu Yanli was looking at him like he was a ghost, which felt fitting. He was moving like one, like a corpse already in rigor mortis animated by some dark magic. She waited for him to walk through into an interview room, and he did not hurry – it was more important to keep his spine straight and his face still.

She sat down opposite him. On the metal table, her phone began to buzz.

Chu Wanning looked at it. "If that's your brother, please, go ahead. Don't mind me."

Mu Yanli silenced the phone. "I don't understand. Why are you here?"

"Don't you want to record this? I would like this to be recorded."

"Why are you *here*?"

“I am here because I heard that Mo Ran was being held on suspicion of my murder.” He spread his hands. “I am here to ensure that he is released, immediately.”

Mu Yanli lifted her chin defiantly. “Obviously he will not be arrested for your murder. But he has already confessed to drugging you and molesting you. And we have CCTV footage from both inside and outside the bar. Under Articles-”

“Articles 237 and 353, yes, I know. However, Article 237 isn’t in effect because it was all consensual.”

Mu Yanli’s face was twisting. “His smacking you against a wall was consensual?”

Chu Wanning spread his hands. “He knows what I like,” he said, feeling sick to his stomach, trying to give the impression that this was something he said, that he was the kind of person who said this.

“And the seizure you had in the road?”

“Unrelated. If you wish to see my medical record, you will notice that I have a heart defect from an old injury. Sometimes, I collapse. Mo Ran carried me back to his flat and made sure I received the proper medical attention.”

“And him waiting until you went to the toilets to pour something into your drink. What was that?”

“Water. I gave him the bottle.”

“I know you didn’t.”

Chu Wanning made sure to smile. “Do you? Who did, then?”

Mu Yanli ignored him. “Pouring something into your drink - are you going to tell me that that was consensual?”

His defective heart was racing, weak and thready. “It was. I was watching him while he did it. It was a sex game.”

Mu Yanli stared at him. “A sex game.”

“Yes. I asked him to do it.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Why would I lie? Why would I protect someone who, according to you, drugged me? Mo Ran confessed because he wanted to protect *me*. He was willing to confess so that he didn’t reveal that I secretly began a relationship with him when he was still my student.”

“I don’t believe a word you’re saying.”

“That is your prerogative. But you are a police officer, not a judge.”

“It’s a judge you’d be committing perjury in front of.”

“It’s not perjury if it’s the truth,” Chu Wanning said. “Everyone knows that I care about my reputation. Why would I destroy it for someone who had committed a crime against me? It makes no sense. No. What I did wasn’t illegal, but it will be extremely embarrassing for me. I will lose my job, my friends, and my reputation. But if you do officially arrest Mo Ran today, I *will* testify.”

He shifted his weight, and the jolt of pain that shot up his body made him break out in a fresh sweat. “However. If I am called to testify, I will feel duty-bound not only to tell the truth about my relationship with Mo Ran, and what I asked him to pretend to do, but what your brother did to me, and what you, a state official, did as his accomplice.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Mu Yanli’s phone lit up with a silent notification, and her eyes were wide as she looked down at it.

“I suspect Hua Binan is trying to reach you. He left to plant my jumper somewhere nearby, but I know he planned to return to wherever he was holding me by dawn. He’ll have realised by now that I’ve escaped.” Chu Wanning watched her. “I must confess I don’t quite know where from, but it’ll be easy to find out. They just need to see what cases you’ve recently looked into, to try and find a man in a farmhouse in Sichuan who killed his wife.”

“You… escaped?” she whispered.

“Yes. Escaped. Your brothers have been keeping me drugged and strapped to a bed since last Monday. However, in the interests of fairness, I will say that only Hua Binan is a rapist. Mingjing retains some glimmer of a conscience.”

“I don’t believe a word you say,” she spat, but her eyes were wide. Chu Wanning realised, in a sudden rare moment of insight, that she had probably been lying to herself. She was clearly an intelligent woman, who knew her brother, but she’d been allowing herself to believe whatever lies Hua Binan had been spinning.

“Maybe. I honestly don’t know whether you believed whatever you brother told you about us being friends – I don’t know what he told you, in fact. I don’t care. I do know that you were trying to frame Mo Ran. I know that you told your brother where he could find an isolated building, and I suspect you knew how he’d get rid of the occupant, given that you chose an uxoricide for him. That’s what makes me wonder if you knew what he was planning on doing to me. He made Mingjing gag me while you were on the phone, when I was trying to call out to you, so I think he hid that from you.”

Chu Wanning had not been able to make eye contact with Xue Zhengyong or Mr. Zhu, but he had no such qualms with Mu Yanli. He stared mercilessly at her. “Of course, that charge will be a minor one, relatively speaking. They’ll find out his role in Rufeng, they’ll find out about

the drug trafficking and the counterfeit medicines, and they'll find out that you covered for him and tracked down information for him. Article 347 alone will probably give him the death penalty. I remember when I was charged with sabotage, I read the whole criminal code. For you, I think the first charge would be… Article 349. 'Any state functionary who screens or shields offenders engaged in smuggling, trafficking in, transporting or manufacturing narcotic drugs shall be given a heavier punishment.' That line comes up quite a lot, especially in Section 7. We can go through the entire code if you'd like, because there are so many articles which are pertinent, but frankly, I am tired and I would like to go home. We both know that it'll be execution for both of you. Shi Mingjing might get away with a couple of decades' imprisonment, if the judge believes that Hua Binan pressured him into helping."

Mu Yanli's red lips were thin. "What do you want?"

"The object I gave to my lawyer outside is a candlestick. On one end is my blood. On the other is your brother's fingerprints, skin cells, and quite possibly semen. It will never see the light of day if Mo Ran is released without charge, his untrue confession fully erased, and his innocence stated unequivocally. In return, I will say nothing about your brothers' crimes, or your involvement. While both of us are free and unharmed, no one will ever be able to see that candlestick. But I will arrange for everyone to know about this if anything happens to either of us."

Mu Yanli glared at him with a truly poisonous hatred. He waited for a moment.

"You might want to decide. I suspect ten minutes have nearly passed."

"Fine."

Chu Wanning raised his eyebrows. "Fine?"

Mu Yanli stood up, and pressed an intercom button. "Zhang, get in here. Mo Ran's to be released without charge."

Chu Wanning had to use the metal table to push himself up. "Thank you. Forgive me if I don't wait here while he's processed."

“Of course,” Mu Yanli replied with acid in her voice. “I completely understand. You should probably go somewhere to sort out that bleeding.”

He looked down, and saw the red smears on the chrome chair. Even though he was the victor in this particular duel, the wound to his pride was a fatal one.

“Not in a clinic or a hospital, of course,” Mu Yanli continued. “Or they might ask how you came by such particular injuries.”

He nodded. “I'll keep my end of the bargain for as long as you keep yours.”

A part of him, floating up on the ceiling, thought that she was probably hoping he was bleeding internally, or that the infection that was causing his fever was already septic. He would have to write a letter, to be released if Mo Ran were to be arrested after he died.

That was the first thing since he’d woken up that nearly brought tears to his eyes. He’d thought that he could rest, but he had to write…

His perfidious body had other ideas. With the negotiation finished and the deal sealed, it wanted to give up; it had remained upright for as long as it could, and the pain was finally overwhelming his consciousness. He had to get out – he had to be hidden before he collapsed, or someone would call an ambulance.

Time was beginning to skip again. Mu Yanli opened the door, and then he was standing in the station’s reception. She was speaking to the officer on the desk, and so Chu Wanning staggered to Zhu Ruoxuan to take the candlestick back.

“Dr. Chu, what’s going on? You need a doctor-”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not, it’s no time to be stubborn.”

“Yuheng, listen to him,” Xue Zhengyong said, and took his elbow.

“Don’t touch me!” Chu Wanning pulled himself away so violently that he fell against the wall; Zhu Ruoxuan and Xue Zhengyong both stepped forward to catch him, and Chu Wanning held the candlestick like a shield. “I told you not to touch me! Why won’t you listen to me?! Don’t *fucking touch me!*”

He had to leave. He had to leave, right now – he was going to pass out, and he couldn’t do it in public. Like a mortally wounded animal, he needed to hide. “I resign from Sisheng,” he said to Xue Zhengyong. “Find Xue Meng another supervisor. I need to go.”

“Yuheng, what’s wrong? Where have you been, you need *help*-”

“Ah, yes, help – you’ve been *such* a help so far. Leave me alone! Don’t touch me, don’t follow me, don’t speak to me!”

Yuheng, the brightest star in Beidou. The pain in his head, his spine, his pelvis was like fire.

“Stay here. They’re releasing Mo Ran. Just *stay here*.”

He shoved the door open, and the cold air was a balm to his burning skin. His flat was a minute’s walk from the station. One minute. Sixty seconds, and then he could pass out. He could do that. He’d crawled through fire, over glass and shrapnel. He could walk for sixty seconds, to save Mo Ran.

His legs were shaking, and only his forward momentum kept him upright as he slithered down the road; they buckled at the door to his flat, but he could press the code to let himself in.

Chu Wanning knew that he would never make it up to his own flat, so once he had fallen into the entryway he crawled across the blessedly cold tiles to the space under the stairs. This would do, he thought, as he lay down and curled into a ball. This would do.

Chapter 69: One Small Basket

Chapter Notes

> They're finally together again! 😭😭😭 I'm sorry this chapter took so long; I have to beg for your patience with the coming one as well. Life is busy and exhausting, and to hurry on with the next chapter, I will beg for your forgiveness to not replying to comments for a chapter or two, if that's okay?

There had been few things that Mo Ran had been certain of in his tumultuous life, but one of them was that nothing could ever eclipse in monstrosity, in pain, in horror and dread and devastation, those hours in the basement under the Drunken Jade. The body of young, sweet Wang Fanghua, one of her hair bunches askew; the blood on the stinking mattress; the unbearable heat; the fog of incense and scented candles; the pounding headache and the pounding of his bruised hands on the door; the fear of the corpse, the fear of prison, the fear of the cruel woman pushing him and pushing him and pushing him to confess to a murder he hadn’t committed.

Some things were the same. A woman, pushing him. Some things were different. The cell was freezing cold. And there was no body.

No body meant agony and hope. It meant that he could not even have the cruel mercy of despair, because Chu Wanning might yet be alive.

Officer Mu questioned him for hours at a time. Wuchang didn’t have a tiger chair, but she kept him handcuffed to the bolted steel table. As though he hadn’t confessed. As though he hadn’t gone with her to Wuchang willingly, eagerly! But it made him look more guilty, he supposed; the Wuchang officers saw him handcuffed, and assumed he’d done something to deserve it, especially when he was a tall, strong man, and the Senior Investigating Officer a woman.

The same questions, over and over again. It was always Officer Mu, on her own, which was odd. Maybe she didn’t trust anyone else with it. She examined every element of the day Chu Wanning had disappeared, probing to find some hole in his story, some detail he tripped over. Unlike his previous police interrogations, though, this one was easy, because he told nothing

but the truth. No shame, no embarrassment, no guilt was enough to change it – he needed to convince her. He'd have confessed to murder in a second if it meant they actually tried looking for Chu Wanning, but it wouldn't.

And the strange thing was… Mu Yanli's expressions didn't match her actions. She was looking more and more tired by the hour, face drawn, a line between her brows. The way she looked at him sometimes… If she hadn't kept on questioning him, Mo Ran would have thought that she believed him. But she couldn't, because she kept asking the same questions, as though *this* time Mo Ran would answer differently. She'd have him hauled out of the cell during the night, so that he never got more than an hour's sleep. On the second night, she kept him in the interrogation room, refusing even to undo the handcuffs. She'd wait silently until he started to nod, and then begin again: What time did he leave? What time did he return? What was he doing? Who might have seen him?

Then, on the third night, she took a phone call, and the questions changed.

Had he ever been to a village called Yuliang? He had been with Chu Wanning? How long had they stayed there? How long had it taken them to drive back? Had they been back since? Where had they stayed? Would people recognise him in Yuliang? Would they remember his face? Would they be perturbed by his sudden appearance?

"No, no, we were all friendly," Mo Ran tried to convince her. "Have you found something? Is he in Yuliang?"

"You tell me."

"I don't know – how would I know?! Please," Mo Ran begged. "Did someone there see something? Say something? Have you found something?"

Mu Yanli studied him. The clock on the wall, ticking loudly, showed that the time was 4:39 in the morning.

"Obviously I've not seen the item myself, and we'll need to send it to Ya'an for DNA testing. But a CNSA jumper has been found in Yuliang."

Mo Ran shook his head. “It- There’s the Xichang Space Centre, in the south. It could- It doesn’t mean-”

“It’s been cut through the middle. And it’s soaked in blood.”

“No,” Mo Ran said, “no, no, that- It can’t be. It’s not his. How dare you say it’s his?! It’s someone else’s, some- It’s not his!”

“The DNA will soon let us know.”

All of his resolutions to be as gentle and quiet as possible fled; he tried to yank his hand free, and the cuff clattered against the metal of the chair. “No! You fucking *liar*! It’s not his – it’s planted! Why aren’t you out there looking for *him*?!”

Mu Yanli stood up. “I’m going to leave you here to think about this, Mo Ran. When I return… Remember. Leniency to those who confess. Life imprisonment is usual, but with a proper show of remorse, you could be out in ten years. Severity to those who resist… That’s the death sentence.”

Mo Ran shook his head. What did a death sentence matter? It would only bring him closer to Chu Wanning and his mother again. The police had wasted all their time on him, and now…

No! He wasn’t dead. He couldn’t be dead! He had to think of the bomb – Chu Wanning had lost blood then, right? A bomb hadn’t been able to kill him. Nangong Liu and Nangong Xu had both tried and both failed; Chu Wanning would outsmart whoever had taken him.

Yuliang, he thought as Officer Mu left. A CNSA jumper in Yuliang. Someone who knew them. This wasn’t some random military fanatic or someone who had been accused in the Rufeng documents. Someone *knew* they had been to Yuliang.

Someone in Yuliang itself? But why? He remembered what Chu Wanning had told him: means, motive, and opportunity. What motive did anyone in Yuliang have?

And means. The police outfits – who in Yuliang could source those?

There was acid in his throat, but he couldn't vomit. There was sand in his eyes, but he couldn't cry. He wanted to smash his head open on the metal table, to pass out if not to die – the pain of *Chu Wanning dead* was literally unbearable.

His ears would never burn again, when Mo Ran kissed him and teased him, calling him *baobei* – a name he pretended to hate, but never ordered Mo Ran not to use. He'd never begin an off-the-cuff lecture on gravitational dynamics or Tang poetry or Vietnamese history or Henry Cavendish or soil erosion. Never cuddle close to Mo Ran in bed, hiding his fragile face in the crook of his neck.

He'd been too greedy. He knew that now. He'd had the audacity to want too much: to want a family, to want a home, to want a love. To want Chu Wanning.

But his soul was small and dirty and breakable. Like a basket full of holes – whatever life-giving water that he tried to keep poured away into the stream.

He'd tried to mend it, but it was all too late. How could he atone for what he'd done? For the lives he'd ended and ruined? His basket was broken beyond repair, and it was been Chu Wanning who had drowned, sinking down into the cold hell of death.

Mo Ran could barely breathe – it felt like his lungs were full of glass. The minutes ticked by, and his heart veered wildly from outraged hope to annihilating despair. Then the clock hands started to jump – perhaps it was sleep he was falling into, or perhaps it was catatonia. He didn't know the difference.

Suddenly, the door was thrown open, and Mu Yanli entered, carrying a large plastic bag.

Gorge rising, Mo Ran thought that it was the jumper, that he was about to see Chu Wanning's blood; the world fluttered at the corners of his consciousness as hornets buzzed in his ears.

Then his eyes caught up with his terror. It wasn't a jumper, bloody or not. It was the tie, belt, and shoelaces that had been taken off him once he'd been taken into custody, along with his phone, his wallet, his watch and his keys.

Mu Yanli undid the second handcuff. "You're free to go."

Mo Ran mouthed wordlessly for a second. "…t? What?"

"I said you're free to go. You're not being charged."

Mo Ran blinked stupidly at her. "For his – is- have you found him? Have you found Chu Wanning?!"

"He came here. We spoke," Mu Yanli snarled, and Mo Ran had to catch himself on the table.

Chu Wanning was alive. He was alive, and he was *there*.

"Thank you!" He managed to stop himself from throwing his arms around Mu Yanli, but he grabbed her hand to shake instead. "Thank you so much – is he here? Where is he? What happened?!"

Mu Yanli wrenched her hand out of his and shook it off, staring at him in astonished horror.

"Sorry, sorry – I was just-" He gathered up his belongings in his shaking hands. "Is he outside? I can go?"

Then reality entered his brain, like a skewer through meat. “But… but I confessed. Not to murder, but to the drugging, to assault.”

Mu Yanli stared at him. Then her thin, red lips twisted into a sneer.

“How noble it was of you, to lie to protect your boyfriend’s reputation. I’ve truly never seen such… self-sacrificial loyalty. But the guilt was too much for him. He took the time, while he was here, to set the record straight. He said that you’d already been in a relationship a year ago, even when he was your professor. That he pressured you into playing some disgusting sex game with him; that he gave you a bottle of water and asked you to pretend to spike his drink and have your wicked way with him. Only then his heart caused some kind of seizure and brought your nasty little play to an end.”

Chu Wanning knew. He *knew*, and he’d still come to bring Mo Ran out of prison. How did he know? Why would he lie? Joy and grief and love swirled in him like a maelstrom.

“No.” Mo Ran shook his head. “No, no, that’s- that’s not what happened.”

“Oh, it is. He took great steps to ensure that that is what happened.” She took a step towards him, and whispered in Mo Ran’s ear. “And as long as he keeps his side of the bargain, that *is* what happened. I won’t even report it. He wins his reputation and yours, and your freedom to boot.”

“What steps?” Mo Ran croaked.

Mu Yanli ignored the question. “But if I hear *one single word* about this, you’ll be arrested faster than you can blink. There’ll be no fucking around at a PSB. You’ll go straight into detention, and then you’ll be murdered before the sun rises. He knows this, but please, do remind him. If he tells the police, if he goes to a hospital, if a word is breathed about this to anyone…”

“What is ‘this’?” The joy of two minutes ago had gone, frozen into a lump in his throat, a stone in his mind. Whatever it was, Officer Mu had something to do with it. “Why are you doing this to us?”

“Because you’re a piece of shit,” Mu Yanli said softly. “No wonder they both hate you so much.”

She took Mo Ran’s elbow and propelled him through the door. He nearly slipped out of his shoes, with the laces in his bag, but it didn’t matter – the feeling of Mu Yanli at his back was worse.

Xue Zhengyong was waiting for him in the reception. “Ran’er! Ran’er, are you all right – did they hurt you?”

Mo Ran shook his head, but the question brought tears to his eyes. He was exhausted, and every muscle in his arms and back was aching from being kept in one position for so long. He leant into his uncle’s embrace for a moment, then pulled back. “Where is he? Did you see him?”

“Yes, he came in, then left.” His uncle looked as tired as Mo Ran felt, but he didn’t even pause to let Mo Ran lace his shoes. “Let’s go, right now, before they change their minds.”

“The policewoman, Officer Mu, she said-”

“Later. Eyes front, walk fast. Zhu Ruoxuan followed him, but the door closed between them. He’s staying there to make sure he doesn’t leave, and no one else goes in. Do you know the code?”

“Yeah. But Wanning won’t be able to get into his flat – I had to replace the door and the lock, remember? I’ve got the key.”

“I’d be amazed if he got up the stairs,” Xue Zhengyong said. They were already trotting down the street – Wuchang was a handful of roads with a handful of streets branching off each one, so at a trot, most buildings were within a minute’s run – but this made Mo Ran sprint, not caring about the snow on the road or his unfitting shoes. “Wait!”

Mo Ran ignored him; he could already see Chu Wanning's flat, with his lawyer, Zhu Ruoxuan, standing outside it.

Zhu Ruoxuan could read his panic and stepped aside; Mo Ran keyed in the code of 3799 and the door buzzed open.

He'd been here before, Mo Ran thought. The smear of bloody footprint on linoleum. The world slowing down, every nanosecond engraved on his memory. His eyes went to the stairs first, but then something in his peripheral vision made him turn.

Teal where there had been none before.

It wasn't Chu Wanning's jumper, but it *was* Chu Wanning, curled up underneath the stairs in a foetal position, like a wounded animal looking for a place to die.

But not dead, Mo Ran thought, as Chu Wanning flinched at the blast of cold air. He fell to his knees, feet kicked out from under him by the pain and the relief, and he scrabbled forwards. "Wanning! Wanning, thank you, thank you, thank you-!"

Chu Wanning was shivering, his face was bruised and sheened with sweat, but he was *alive*, he wasn't in some shallow grave near Yuliang, covered in blood like his CNSA jumper- Mo Ran looked down again, reassuring himself, yes, here, alive, here, *alive*.

"Mo Ran…" Chu Wanning blinked up at him as he tried to surface from unconsciousness. "You're alive… Thought I was too late…"

"No. No, no, not too late. You came for me."

Chu Wanning raised his hand, and Mo Ran felt the ghost of a touch on his cheek, as soft as a butterfly's wings, and as hot as a bullet. Then he pulled back as though he was the one who

had been burnt, and his face twisted in horror and devastation. “No… Not… You don’t…”

“Don’t what? Don’t what?” Chu Wanning’s eyes slid shut again. “Come on, speak to me, it’s all all right now, I promise.”

Mo Ran pulled Chu Wanning up into his arms and looked around at his uncle. *Fuck* Mu Yanli. “Call an ambulance!”

Xue Zhengyong and Zhu Ruoxuan shared a look. His uncle crouched down beside them, and placed his hand against Chu Wanning’s forehead.

“He’s got a fever, but… What do you think, Mr. Zhu? About the blood?”

“Not an unsafe amount,” Zhu Ruoxuan said. "I don't think it's an open wound.”

“Not an *unsafe amount*?!” Mo Ran hissed. “What the fuck – he needs to go to a *hospital*!”

“Ran’er. He wasn’t arrested, but that doesn’t mean the police weren’t involved,” Xue Zhengyong said in a low voice.

“She said… Officer Mu.” Mo Ran’s eyes were burning, but he couldn’t look away from Chu Wanning’s face. “She said that if he went to a clinic or a hospital, then the deal was off. He made some kind of deal…”

“What else did she say? Ran’er, this is important,” Xue Zhengyong said.

Mo Ran shook his head. “It doesn't matter, he needs help!”

“We’ll get help,” his uncle replied. “Tell me.”

“She said… She said that if we told anyone, I’d be arrested. And that in the detention centre, I’d… Someone would…”

The muscles in Xue Zhengyong’s face twitched. “Okay. You heard that, Mr. Zhu?”

“I did,” Zhu Ruoxuan said. “I know someone – he tried to blow the whistle at Guyueye about a decade ago and was struck off. But he was a good doctor. He can look over Professor Chu without reporting… whatever injuries he finds. The problem is that he has to come from Chongqing.”

“That’s too far!” Mo Ran’s grip on Chu Wanning tightened. “He needs help *now*.”

Xue Zhengyong snapped his fingers. “His student – Hua Binan. He’s in medical training, right? And I have his number, from when he rang me back in August –”

“No.”

Mo Ran looked down; Chu Wanning stared up at him, grey-faced, black irises ringed in white. His long fingers twisted in Mo Ran’s three-day-old shirt. “*No.*”

Chapter 70: The Breaking of the Bough

Chapter Notes

> Oh, this one was so hard to write. I wrote it from Mo Ran's POV, then Chu Wanning's, then deleted them both and started from Mo Ran's again. It's been a rough couple of weeks, so I wanted to thank you for your patience, and especially to Watergoat for your help and your encouragement with this chapter.

Chu Wanning's voice was strangled. It sounded more strangled than when he was literally hanging; then, Chu Wanning's voice had been soft, determined, clear. This was the sound of pure agony and fear.

"Hua Binan?" Mo Ran said quietly. "Is he… Did *he* do this?"

"You have to warn…" Chu Wanning tried to say, but his face spasmed, and another violent shiver ran through him.

Mo Ran looked down at Chu Wanning, and the sight leeched some of the joy from him. There were cuts and layers of bruises on his face. His hair was lank and unwashed at the front, and matted and knotted at the back. Mo Ran had never seen his hair so untidy. He smelt *wrong*, of iron and salt instead of soap and wood and flowers.

Chu Wanning wasn't wearing his own clothes. They were too big – he'd certainly never seen Chu Wanning wearing popper tracksuit bottoms before, especially not in *polyester*. It was cotton tai chi trousers for him, or flannel in the winter.

But it was the jumper that made him pause. In all the time he had known him, Chu Wanning had never worn bright teal, but Mo Ran was sure that he recognised it somehow.

"It's okay," Mo Ran said, trying to keep his voice as calm and reassuring as possible. "We'll get you up into the warm, and then you can tell us. It's all right."

Zhu Ruoxuan was distracted by something outside. He opened the door, and suddenly on the wind Mo Ran heard a voice that he recognised instantly, that lifted the hairs on the back of his neck and made his scalp freeze.

"Mo Ran! Tell Mo Ran I need to speak to him!"

It had been months since he'd last heard that voice, but he knew it instantly. Shi Mei.

"I'll be back in a moment," he said to Chu Wanning, whose eyes were shut again. "Mr. Zhu–?"

"I'll watch him," the lawyer said. He had taken off his jacket and was rolling it into a pillow, and Xue Zhengyong held the door open.

"Shut the door behind us," Mo Ran said. Losing contact with Chu Wanning felt like losing contact with the earth, and it stirred his blood into electricity and adrenaline.

Shi Mei looked different with his broken nose. Harder. He was holding a paper bag from the Wuchang pharmacy, already beginning to be soaked by the diagonal snow, and in his other…

In his other, he held out a silver chain, at the end of which shone a deep red stone.

Mo Ran's fingers went to his own necklace, still safe around his neck.

"I just want to talk, and then I'll go," Shi Mei said, and then nodded. "President Xue."

"How did you get that?" Mo Ran asked coldly. He'd just been released without a murder charge, but by *fuck*, it was tempting to go right back in.

“I stole it,” Shi Mei said. “From my brother.”

Mo Ran’s jaw dropped, and the universe rearranged itself in a chaotic, disgusting, incredible conflagration.

His brother– his *brother*? Chu Wanning was Shi Mei’s brother – his fucking *brother?!*

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Shi Mei said, rolling his eyes up to look at the white–out sky. “No! You really are the dumbest bastard alive!”

“Shi Mingjing,” Xue Zhengyong said. His voice was harsher than Mo Ran had ever heard it. “What are you doing here? What is that?”

“It’s a necklace I gave to Wanning,” Mo Ran said.

“My brother took it from him, and I took it from my brother,” Shi Mei said. “You can have it back in a second, though I doubt Chu–*laoshi* will want it.”

“You don’t have a brother,” Mo Ran said, which, yes, he knew was stupid – obviously Shi Mei would know that better than Mo Ran. “You’ve *never* mentioned a brother!”

Shi Mei gave him a flat look of utter boredom. “Why would I tell you anything about me?” he sneered. “Urgh. You’re so… Fuck you. My brother. Hua Binan. You might want to avoid him if you want to live, because he hates you even more than I do.”

And suddenly, Mo Ran could see it. The same peach–blossom eyes, the same soft mouths, the same brown in the hair.

That night, the night of Chu Wanning's birthday. Hua Binan had admitted to looking up Chu Wanning's medical record in Guyueye, had tried to give him some drugs that he'd developed, had been skulking around in the darkness of the garden, had tried to imply that Mo Ran had been a danger to Chu Wanning…

And then that strange meeting, outside Chu Wanning's bedroom.

"You're so good with him. He let you help him all the way up. I'd never have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"Shi Mingjing said that you didn't like him."

"I suppose it would be difficult for you to dislike him, after what he did for you. Maybe Shi Mingjing got the wrong end of the stick, like me."

"His quality is of a kind that not everyone can recognise, wouldn't you agree?"

He remembered feeling so irritated, aware that Hua Binan was taunting him about something, was veiling what he meant. But this… This was impossible.

And yet Chu Wanning had looked truly, truly terrified when Xue Zhengyong suggested that they ask Hua Binan for help.

Chu Wanning rarely looked like that. He hadn't when Nangong Xu had hanged him; he'd been trying to reassure Mo Ran with his eyes then.

The first time he'd ever seen that terror in Chu Wanning's eyes had been the night they were mugged, the night that Chu Wanning thought he'd been stabbed.

The second time had been in the instant before the bomb went off.

The third time had been when Huaizui had visited the hospital.

"What did he do to him?" Mo Ran said. His voice was trembling with fury. "What did *you do to him?*"

"What did *I* do to him?" Shi Mei asked. "*I* rescued him. My brother, on the other hand, did what *you* did. Drugged him, hurt him, and raped him."

The universe split into two.

One half was contained within his broken heart. It contained nothing but grief, pain, horror, guilt, swirling like a maelstrom.

One half was contained within his broken mind. It contained nothing but raw and white-hot rage.

Hua Binan had raped Chu Wanning. His own brother didn't even soften it with some other word. Chu Wanning, taken from his little flat, drugged, and… And. And he'd been gone for more than a week. The bruises on his face, the matted hair on the back of his head, the strange clothes Mo Ran had never seen before. Blood. Suddenly, these horrific details coalesced into a certainty worse than anything he could have imagined.

The static in front of his eyes slowly turned back into slanting snow as he came back to consciousness.

Shi Mei had clearly been waiting for it, because he was smiling, a teeth–baring snarl of a grin. Only then did he continue.

"Admittedly, my brother managed to do it many more times than you would have, but he also paid a lot more than you. He told me that you haggled him down for that drug he sold you in

Ya'an. What was it? Five hundred yuan down to three hundred and eighty?"

It felt like the second barrel of the shotgun. Two memories finally connected – Hua Binan's silhouette in the corridor of the Xues' mansion, and the tall, facemask-wearing man outside the toilets in the nightclub in Ya'an.

"No," he said. "No, that's– *Why would he–?*"

"I assume your cousin told you the truth about last year," Shi Mei continued mercilessly. "Thanks for the efforts."

Mo Ran slid on the snow in his laceless shoes, but his uncle pulled him back with a grip like iron.

Shi Mei finally turned his gaze to Xue Zhengyong. "He confessed it all to my sister, by the way, though she also had CCTV footage of it. He told her the date, the times, where he did it – even the outfits they wore, apparently. I imagine Chu-*laoshi* made a deal to make that go away in exchange for not saying anything about us."

His older sister? The only person to whom he had confessed was–

Mo Ran reeled. Bile rose and scorched the back of his throat.

He had shaken Mu Yanli's hand. He had *thanked* her.

Shi Mei dropped the carnelian necklace into the paper bag, then threw it at Mo Ran's feet. "I stole all this from the pharmacy; I'm already going on the run, so I thought I'd give Chu-*laoshi* a goodbye present. My brother's clean, I'm sure, but by the end he'd moved onto, ah, implements."

Xue Zhengyong had to wrap his arms around Mo Ran to stop him from murdering Shi Mei in broad daylight, in the middle of Wuchang. “Ran’er!”

“I’m doing you a favour, A-Ran,” Shi Mei said. “It’s not like he’d ever tell you this himself, would he? In case there’s any infection there’s broad-spectrum antibiotics in here. I believe Chu-*laoshi* is holding onto the candlestick as collateral for your worthless hide.” He sighed, and his lovely eyes flicked back to Xue Zhengyong. “In any case, I’m glad that you were here as well, President Xue. If I should lose my family for helping Chu Wanning, I think it’s only fair that A-Ran should lose his too for… Though maybe your son cares more about that kind of thing than you do.”

“If you are going to go,” Xue Zhengyong replied, “go. Rabbits bite too.”

“Oh, I know.” Shi Mei looked back at Mo Ran. Maybe it was his roiling emotional state, or maybe it was just the snow, but for a moment, the expression on Shi Mei’s face wasn’t poisonous hatred or taunting anger. For a moment, he was the old Shi Mei again, open and gentle, just older and broken. He opened his mouth to say something, and then apparently thought better of it. He shrugged to himself, and turned away.

“Come on,” Xue Zhengyong said in a voice that brooked no argument. He tugged his arm. “Come *on*.”

“I didn’t,” he said. “Uncle, I didn’t…”

Xue Zhengyong looked at him – looked up at him, for although he was a tall man, Mo Ran was taller. “What didn’t you do?” he asked.

The question was as pointed as the tip of a dagger pressed against his sterum.

The temptation to lie wrapped around him like a warm coat. He let it drop. “I didn’t rape him.”

Xue Zhengyong heard the admission, and his mouth twisted.

"When?"

"February. He knows." He knew, but Mo Ran had been too cowardly to tell him.

A muscle worked in Xue Zhengyong's jaw.

"I'll fetch my wife. She never practised, but she'll at least be able to tell whether there's any internal bleeding."

My wife. Not *wifey* or *your auntie.* My wife.

"If there is, I'll bring him to the hospital myself," Mo Ran promised.

His uncle just looked at him, and for a moment Mo Ran really did feel as though he'd rather die than face that expression of utter and exhausted disappointment.

"I'll fetch her. And then I want the two of you to tell us exactly what's gone on."

Mo Ran could only nod wordlessly as his uncle walked into the snow, following the vanished Shi Mei.

He wanted to fall to his knees and sob until he froze. But he didn't deserve that. *This* was what he deserved; he had been postponing the payment however he could, but now the debt was due.

So instead he keyed himself back into Chu Wanning's building, and his eyes lingered on the plastic bag Chu Wanning lay curled around.

“Ah, Xue Zhengyong…?” asked Zhu Ruoxuan, and Mo Ran pulled himself together.

“He’s gone to fetch my aunt. She never practised as a doctor, but she trained in healthcare.”

“Ah, good, good. Um, I think that if we both take one arm across our shoulders–”

“No need. Please carry the bags.” He handed the lawyer the sodden mass of the pharmacy bag, crouched down to hook one of his arms under Chu Wanning’s knees, and lifted him in his arms.

Mo Ran had been here before, climbing these stairs, Chu Wanning’s head on his shoulder. Then, Chu Wanning had been muttering “I’m fine, I’m fine” with every step. He’d told Mo Ran that the closest thing he’d had to a father had stabbed him, and when he’d fallen asleep on his couch, Mo Ran had gone through every drawer in his flat. As though he’d find a diary full of his nefarious plans to pressure Shi Mei into sleeping with him.

He remembered thinking that Chu Wanning hadn’t even had condoms. He’d wondered whether he just didn’t care about wearing them in whatever he was planning for kind, innocent Shi Mei, or whether it was because he was hiding any evidence of sexual activities from whoever might have cause to search his flat.

Zhu Ruoxuan found his keys in the plastic bag with his belongings, and eventually figured out which key was the one to Chu Wanning’s new door. Despite his aching arms screaming in protest, Mo Ran didn’t offer any help. This would be the last time he could be so close to Chu Wanning.

The flat was freezing cold, and Chu Wanning clung closer to Mo Ran. Against his neck, Mo Ran could feel the heat radiating from Chu Wanning’s skin. He went past Zhu Ruoxuan, straight through into the bedroom, and placed Chu Wanning on top of the cover.

Without him in his arms, the weariness hit Mo Ran with all the force of a high–speed train. His knees began to shake, but he forced himself to go back out into the main room.

Zhu Ruoxuan stood beside the front door. He was staring down into an open carrier bag.

"What is it?" Mo Ran asked; he'd thought it was his own for a second, holding his wallet and phone and shoelaces, but the lawyer had placed that one on the counter.

Zhu Ruoxuan looked up with a face like sandstone. "It is… important." He closed it and began to wrap it up again. "No one is to touch this. Keep it wrapped up in plastic."

Mo Ran shook his head. "I get that. What *is* it?"

"I believe it might be evidence," he said delicately. "Professor Chu was very clear about it. He gave it to me before he spoke to Officer Mu, and said that if he had not returned in ten minutes, then we could open it. Given the outcome of his conversation, I think he was using it as leverage."

"What is it?" Mo Ran asked again. "… is it a candlestick?"

"How did…?" Zhu Ruoxuan shook his head, face white. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should go. I'll keep my phone on."

"Of course. Thank you, Mr. Zhu," Mo Ran said, and remembered to shake his hand. "I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble. You have my number; whatever hours you waited…"

"Thank you," he said. "And, um. Well. Look after Professor Chu."

Mo Ran smiled, as difficult as it was with his trembling chin. "Of course. Look after yourself."

Zhu Ruoxuan handed the plastic bag to him. "And you. I'll see myself out."

He closed the door behind him, and Mo Ran finally sank to the floor. It was all right, he thought, to lose his family. It was what he deserved. Six hours ago, if someone had told him that the price for Chu Wanning's life was for him to be completely alone in the world, he would have paid it with ecstatic laughter.

So why did it feel like his heart was being torn out of his chest?

He opened the carrier bag, and saw the glint of brass through the darkness of dried blood.

What are you still doing here? A voice inside him spoke, commanding and arrogant and sick with bloodhunger. *Snivelling and self-pitying on the floor?*

Get the fuck up. Find Hua Binan. And kill him.

He rose like a corpse from the grave. Every muscle felt like a stone, every ligament like lead, every bone like liquid acid. Then he heard a sound from Chu Wanning's bedroom, something between a moan and a whimper, and the other voice of his soul screamed that revenge could wait.

Mo Ran dropped the bag containing the candlestick, unable to hold it for another second, and grabbed the soggy mass that the pharmacy bag had become. "I'm coming, I'm here. I'm here."

Chu Wanning was pulling himself up on the bed. He visibly realised that a sitting position was beyond him, but leant back against the headboard.

"Easy, easy." Mo Ran staggered forward and placed another cushion behind his shoulders. "Here…" He smiled as reassuringly as he could. "Hey."

Oh, he looked awful. Cracked lips, skin like wax paper with the flush of fever across his cheeks and forehead, dark violet shadows under his eyes.

But beautiful too, because he was alive.

“Mo Ran…”

Once, Chu Wanning had been the most expressionless man Mo Ran had ever met. But now he could read him, and with that secret language decoded, he could easily read first the relief, the overwhelming relief and tenderness and love on his face, like dew on petals, in his eyes like clear water.

And then, just as easily, the total devastation.

“I’m fine,” Mo Ran hurried to say. “We’re both fine – you’re safe now. Wanning…”

“Don’t,” Chu Wanning whispered. “Please, don’t.”

Oh. Of course. If Chu Wanning knew, then he had lost the right to use that name.

Chu Wanning’s gaze was on Mo Ran’s hands. Or so he thought. Chu Wanning ran a fingertip across his wrist, his touch as soft as a kiss of the wind, and Mo Ran saw the swollen band of red that would be purple in a day.

“It’s fine,” he said. “It’s nothing.”

“Did they have a tiger chair?”

“No, no. Just handcuffs. I’m all right.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “I couldn’t get out,” he said in a broken whisper. “I couldn’t come to save you.”

All of Mo Ran’s promises not to burden Chu Wanning with his tears dissolved into salt. “You did, sweetheart, shizun, I mean– You did. You did, though.”

“Only because Shi Mingjing…” Then Chu Wanning closed his eyes, a spasm of agony on his face. “Oh… Oh. I need to say something.”

Mo Ran turned his hands over to hold Chu Wanning’s. He didn’t miss the new ripple of pain, but Chu Wanning didn’t pull it free. Instead he curled his shaking fingers around Mo Ran’s, and looked down at their joined hands, eyes wide with focus, eyebrows drawn in concentration.

“It has come to my attention,” Chu Wanning began carefully, “that about a year ago… Shi Mingjing may have told you that I… that I tried to kiss him. I know that you have no reason to believe me–”

“No,” Mo Ran said, his tears boiling instantly into sobs, “*no*–”

“No, let me finish,” Chu Wanning said, squeezing his eyes shut. “Please, I must say this. I know that– I don’t have any evidence that I can offer you–”

In Yuliang, he’d asked Chu Wanning why he always refused to defend himself, to give any justification or explanation in the face of people’s uncharitable and prejudiced interpretations, and Chu Wanning… Chu Wanning had said, *“What is defending myself going to do other than make me look even more pathetic?”*

Mo Ran hadn’t realised that there was any tiny splinter of his heart that had yet to break, but this trembling denial that Chu Wanning was offering to him, as though Mo Ran was his judge rather than the filth-ridden criminal in the dock, proved its erstwhile existence.

“No, no, no.” Mo Ran bent his head and kissed Chu Wanning’s hand. “No, I know, I know, *baobei*, I know.”

Chu Wanning blinked, shocked out of his prepared speech. “But– how?”

“Xue Meng saw it – he downloaded the footage from the lab cameras – he has it, he showed me.”

With a sharp inhalation and a dazed fluttering of eyelashes, Chu Wanning assimilated this. “So… He lied to me. He *lied*… He– Hua Binan, he’s, he’s Shi Mingjing’s brother – he said that Shi Mingjing had told you that *I’d* been the one to– He said that–” He exhaled in a damp laugh of relief. “He said that you had a plan to *seduce* me, so that Shi Mingjing would have proof that I’d targeted another student, and that was the only reason you…”

Chu Wanning trailed off as Mo Ran continued not to reply. His beloved face blurred and sharpened as the tears poured down Mo Ran’s cheeks.

Mo Ran could say nothing, do nothing, other than watch Chu Wanning’s face slowly crumple. His shoulders turned in. He drew a shuddering, hollow breath and, finally, he looked down.

“Oh.”

Chapter 71: Climbing the Western Tower in Silence

He was the stupidest man in the world.

The worst of it was that Hua Binan *had* told him. Even when Mu Yanli had confirmed that Mo Ran had confessed to drugging him, some part of him had thought, had hoped beyond hope that it was a horrible misunderstanding, a double-bluff, another cruel manipulation of the truth by Hua Binan.

But the truth was written on Mo Ran's tear-streaked face, so clear that even Chu Wanning could read it.

Closing his eyes against it did nothing. Mo Ran's face was written on his heart; paradoxically, he could see it more clearly than with his eyes open.

The worst thing was that it all made sense. *Finally,* it all made sense. How kind Mo Ran had been in the hospital in Ya'an, even when Chu Wanning had been to blame for him being blown up. Why he had asked to phone him every week while he was in Shanghai. How he had looked after him in Yuliang. Oh, Yuliang – that week had been the most exquisite agony, the most painful balm. He had never felt so… bearable. As neutral as some poor animal. Until the very end, when Mo Ran had told him that he wanted to be his friend.

That he wanted to look after him.

Stupid! *That* should have been his clue, no matter how addled he'd been! His brain had shut down, so overwhelmed by the thought – and with good reason, it turned out. He had been unable to accept the reality because *it was not reality*. He had known in his heart of hearts that it was a lie, but he was so wretchedly pathetic, so infatuated and lonely, that he had convinced himself to believe it. That someone as passionate and alive and kind and beautiful as Mo Ran could truly, genuinely care for a cold, worn-out, worthless *thing* like Chu Wanning.

But how good an actor was Mo Ran? How could he have been able to bear his presence for so long? All the boring, stupid, awkward things he said and did…

And then.

How could Mo Ran have slept with him? He considered that it didn't matter whom it was with – after all, the last week with Hua Binan had taught him that some didn't need a response or acquiescence from the object of their desires – but Mo Ran had talked to him, kissed him, given him pleasure before he'd seen to his own. Was he pretending that Chu Wanning was Shi Mei? But they had been face-to-face… Was there evidence that he had been collecting?

When had he stopped giving information back to Shi Mingjing? Had they laughed together about what Chu Wanning sounded like in bed, the disgusting faces he made, how inexperienced and unpleasant he was? Mo Ran had teased him about how clearly no one had ever been able to bear the idea of sex with him before – had he shared those same jokes with Shi Mingjing? Had Mo Ran relayed what he'd said when he'd 'confessed' his feelings? Had they agreed that he really was boring and old and ugly? Hua Binan had been there too that night – had he heard?

Had Mo Ran been calling Shi Mingjing from Yuliang? Had he told him how weak Chu Wanning was, unable to shovel soil? Laughing at how pathetic he was, at his haircut, at how a whole village full of strangers had disliked him too, at how he had been idiotic enough to cut the sleeves off his shirt? Had Mo Ran told him what his back looked like, let him know how much uglier Chu Wanning had become?

Memories collided like carriages coupling, forming a train of thought that led straight to Hell.

"Did you tell Shi Mingjing about the roof?" he breathed.

Mo Ran shook his head, fresh tears scattering. "No!" He fell to his knees on the floor in the corner formed by the nightstand and the bedside. "No, no, of course not– I would *never*–"

“I said they’d tie me to a bed,” Chu Wanning said. “If they knew I’d tried to kill myself. And they – Hua Binan, Shi Mingjing – they had straps, padded leather straps. Like in a mental hospital. Those were what…”

Mo Ran turned away and hid his face in his hands. He sucked down a breath that sounded like agony, and *he had, he* had*, he’d told Shi Mingjing*.

Then he turned back and gripped Chu Wanning’s hand. “No. No, no, I promise. On my mother, my *mother*, I promise.”

Shi Mingjing had sworn by his mother as well – that was the difference, Chu Wanning thought, between a dead mother and a mother who left you for dead. He’d never sworn by his mother in his life.

Mo Ran’s hand was so strangely cold that he suddenly had the awful thought that Mo Ran was dead, a ghost. And his face was so stricken, and Chu Wanning suddenly realised what he’d just said.

He’d only said that they’d tied him down. He hadn’t said that Hua Binan had done to him, he reassured himself, rewinding his words. Mo Ran never had to know. Mo Ran never *could* know. Mo Ran had already known about his humiliation, being an architect of it, but he did not have to know about the violation and defilement as well. He wanted to retain even some semblance of dignity, of…

Oh, of what? There was nothing. Mo Ran knew what he looked like naked, what he looked like at the moment of climax, what he looked like during a meltdown, what he looked like when his voice betrayed him, what he looked like when he cried. What Hua Binan had done to him felt merely… vulgar, in comparison to that.

Vulgar, but terrifying, and the terror brought clarity: none of this mattered. Chu Wanning’s *feelings*, his hurt and his emotions – they were nothing in comparison to the danger that Hua Binan presented to Mo Ran. He was being selfish – always so *despicably selfish* – allowing himself to be paralysed by something as insignificant as his feelings. Mo Ran was in danger.

“It doesn’t matter.” His voice wasn’t quite cold, but it was… flat. That would do. He tried to sit up. It made his head spin, and Mo Ran was there, helping him up. Chu Wanning tried to shake off his hands; those caring, helping hands were not for him anymore. They never had been.

“Of course it *matters*-”

“No,” Chu Wanning said. “No. I need to explain: Hua Binan. It was Hua Binan. He’s- I know that- Shi Mingjing.” It was so difficult to think, when he just wanted to sleep. But the danger to Mo Ran had only abated; it had not been destroyed. “I know that you and Shi Mingjing- Mo Ran, this will be hard to hear, but Shi Mingjing isn’t what he seems – he’s been manipulating you-”

“I know,” Mo Ran said, “*I know*-”

Of course he knew. Stupid! Mo Ran had said that Xue Meng had shown him the footage from the laboratory – how could he have forgotten? Time felt like it was blurring, stretched and contorted by heat and chills and pain.

“No, no, you don’t, not all of it. Shi Mingjing is Hua Binan’s younger brother, and Mu Yanli is their older sister, they’ve planned all of this together.”

“I *know*,” Mo Ran said, and despite the earlier exhortation, he squeezed Chu Wanning’s hand. “It’s all right. I know that it’s them. I know to be suspicious of them.”

Chu Wanning nodded. “You mustn’t let them in, when you go. Shi Mingjing knows where you live.”

Mo Ran’s mouth twisted, like a child trying desperately not to cry. “Where I… I. Wanning. I know I don’t have the right to ask, but please. Please don’t make me go.”

It was too painful, to even consider Mo Ran's presence – the shame of what he might find out, his proximity when Chu Wanning could no longer touch him. "No."

"Please! Please, *please* – I'll sleep outside, I'll sleep on the floor! I won't say a word to you! But I can't be somewhere else. I can't not know where you are. Please don't leave me alone."

"Stop. Please, stop. You don't have to do this anymore."

Mo Ran shook his head in confusion and clung to Chu Wanning's hand. "Please don't send me away!"

"You'll be safe with your aunt and uncle-"

"I need to be with *you!* I need to know you're safe, I need to- Please!"

He had only seen Mo Ran so distressed once before, in the seconds before Nangong Si had hanged him. Why was Mo Ran doing this? He didn't need to pretend anymore…

In Shanghai he'd quoted Kurt Vonnegut to Mo Ran, and another line came to him: *we are what we pretend to be.* Could it be that Mo Ran had come to like him a little, in the course of his pretence?

"You don't need to pretend anymore." Chu Wanning shook his head. "I'd rather you didn't."

"Pretend…?" Mo Ran's eyes slowly widened. "Oh – no, Wanning! When do you think-? No, *no*, I'm not pretending!"

"I forgive you. I said that to you. I forgive you for whatever you've done. I won't tell your aunt and uncle. You can say that we broke up. That I broke up with you, if you like, or that it was your choice. Whichever you prefer."

“They know! Shi Mei was waiting outside, he told us everything, my uncle heard it all!” Mo Ran pushed all of that away with a gesture, and then firmly clasped Chu Wanning’s hand. “I don’t want to say we broke up – I don’t want to break up!”

“We cannot break up,” Chu Wanning said. His voice was beginning to shake under the strain. “If we were never together. If the whole time, you were speaking to Shi Mingjing. *Please*, Mo Ran, I am trying to be reasonable-”

“Wait, wait!” Mo Ran bent his head over Chu Wanning’s hand. “Wait. When… When do you think…? Baobei, when do you think I found out?”

“I don’t know,” Chu Wanning said, and hated how small his voice was. “I couldn’t… I don’t know. But we didn’t… We didn’t sleep together until November…”

Mo Ran bent over, as though Chu Wanning had just punched him in the solar plexus. “*No*. No, no, no, Wanning, Shizun, no – please, listen to me. I’ve known what a piece of shit Shi Mei has been for months. I’ve known since the bomb. You were still in the operating theatre, that night, and Shi Mei came to visit me, but Xue Meng saw him, he broke his nose, that’s when he showed me the footage from the lab! *Nothing* of what was in the hospital was part of- none of that, I knew then, I knew all of it!”

He blinked, and something cold rolled down his cheeks. “So- So in Yuliang, you weren’t-?”

“No. No, no, *baobei*, I promise, I knew by then, I knew.”

“But then why were you so kind to me?”

“Wanning, I’m so sorry – none of this was you, you did none of this. You deserved- I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry-”

“But why did you…? You said in Yuliang that we were friends, and I don’t-” The world was spinning around him, and he didn’t understand. He had the strange sensation that he was bleeding sound, that there was darkness in his ears and buzzing in his eyes.

Then the buzzing was real, and terror gripped him like a claw around his heart. “No!”

“It’s my uncle-”

“It’s him!” Hua Binan had buzzed up – Chu Wanning felt stone-cold certainty that he was at the door, that he was coming, that he would kill Mo Ran and Chu Wanning was helpless and couldn’t defend him, he couldn’t do anything- “I had the door on the latch, like you said, but he buzzed- Hua Binan, it was Hua Binan!”

“I know, I know,” Mo Ran said, and cradled Chu Wanning’s face in his large hand. How strange; normally Mo Ran’s hand was hot, but it felt cold now.

And how strange, that Chu Wanning knew that Mo Ran didn’t love him, but that the gesture calmed his perfidious heart a little anyway.

Despite the days in custody, Mo Ran was faster than him; he was at the intercom while Chu Wanning was still forcing himself to stand up. He used the wall and the doorframe to support himself into the main room, and stared, nauseated, at the bowl of food left beside the computer, the towel he’d been using to dry his hair still thrown beside the laundry basket.

This wasn’t safe. They weren’t safe here.

Mo Ran was opening the door, but it wasn’t just his uncle. Horror compounded upon horror, because Xue Zhengyong had brought Wang Chuqing with him.

“How *dare* you?” The idea of exposing Wang Chuqing, a woman so gentle, so kind, to such filth horrified him to the depths of his soul. “Out!”

“You need a doctor,” Xue Zhengyong said, as angrily as Chu Wanning had ever heard him.

“No, I don’t!”

Xue Zhengyong gave that the attention it deserved. “And as you refuse to go to a hospital, my wife has come to you. Or would you like me to find Dr. Tanlang instead?”

Just for a moment, Chu Wanning hated Xue Zhengyong. He knew how much Chu Wanning disliked Dr. Tanlang – he thought that he was a contemptuous, sarcastic bully, who delighted in making people grovel. Dr. Tanlang, in turn, was forever throwing barbs about ‘their resident celebrity’, about Chu Wanning’s career, his age, his looks, and his arrogant aversion to hierarchy.

But Wang Chuqing… He couldn’t bear for her to see him like this, to know what had happened.

“Fine. Get Tanlang.”

“*Chu Wanning!*” Xue Zhengyong shouted.

“Better yet, get out.”

“All of you, stop,” said Wang Chuqing. She looked at Chu Wanning. “Shi Mingjing told my husband what Hua Binan did to you. You’re not shocking my delicate feminine sensibilities. For heaven’s sake, Wanning.”

“I don’t want a doctor, I don’t need a doctor! No! It’s such a simple word, why does no one understand it?! I said *no!*”

Wang Chuqing stepped forward anyway. “Think. If you die of internal bleeding, it’ll be Ran’er that they arrest. That’s all I need to check for.”

The sickening embarrassment of it. The disgrace. And the cruelty, that she knew how to make him submit. He closed his eyes, defeated, and stepped back into the bedroom.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, and to his great shame, it was a plea, not an order.

“I won’t, sweetheart,” she said; her words were kind, but her voice was firm. That was better, Chu Wanning thought deliriously. If her voice had been kind he would have collapsed.

As she closed the door behind them, he heard Xue Zhengyong speak. “Now. Sit down. Tell me everything.”

“Could you lie down on the bed for me?” asked Wang Chuqing, and Chu Wanning was brought back to his own interrogation.

“Shi Mingjing…?”

“Said that Hua Binan is his brother, and Mu Yanli his sister. I’ve told Xue Meng, he knows not to speak to any of them,” she confirmed, and Chu Wanning gingerly lay down. The jolt of pain through his hips was blinding, but she thankfully didn’t mention it.

“And he said…?”

“He said that he was sure his brother was clean,” and *that* thought hadn’t even occurred to Chu Wanning, “though I’m assuming he didn’t wear protection?”

“I can’t do this,” Chu Wanning said.

“You can,” Wang Chuqing said, in a voice that brooked no argument. “I’m going to lift up your jumper. I’m looking for any swelling, any large bruises…”

“There are bruises.”

“Not surface ones, Wanning. Bruises from internal bleeding look and feel different.” He couldn’t read her expression as she studied his abdomen. “May I touch it?”

He struggled for a moment, with the urge to shove her away, the urge to run, the urge to throw himself through the bedroom window. But the fact that she waited for his response was eventually to give him the courage he needed to nod.

She did not thank him, another sensitivity for which, at a vast distance, he was grateful. “Hmm. That obviously hurts – does it reach your back?” she asked as she pressed on the largest mark.

“No. Anterior only. It’s shallow.”

She checked his pulse, his blood pressure, his respiratory rate, his capillary refill, and all the bones in his pelvis. He knew all the reasons for it from his months in the hospital, both as a teenager and more recently, and eventually she reached the same conclusion as him: that there was no internal bleeding, or at least, any was mild and would heal on its own.

“Before we go back,” she said delicately, as Chu Wanning stared at the blank wall. “Um. Mo Ran… He said that you know that he…”

“Drugged me? Yes. It doesn’t matter.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw Wang Chuqing blink at him. “Of course it matters.”

Being drugged, being shoved against a brick wall and kissed and touched, seizing in terror on the street – that was nothing. How could Wang Chuqing not see that?

Mo Ran buying him a golden mug, as though Chu Wanning deserved a present.

Mo Ran inviting him to eat lunch, as though he enjoyed Chu Wanning's company.

Mo Ran asking him how his morning had been, as though he really wanted to know the answer.

Mo Ran listening to him talk, as though he thought Chu Wanning was interesting.

Mo Ran jogging across the immaculate stretch of snow to greet him in front of his tai chi friends, as though he was happy to be seen with him in public.

Mo Ran looking angry on his behalf when they categorised his hate mail, as though he didn't think that Chu Wanning deserved even worse.

Mo Ran bringing him food with ginger and cinnamon when he was ill, as though he was worried about whether Chu Wanning was eating enough.

Mo Ran saying that he had missed him over the New Year's celebrations. That night, he'd drugged him. Were there photos on his phone? Had he warned Shi Mingjing in advance, to video it? But the next day he'd been so upset, so angry, and he had wiped his face with a cool cloth, had held Chu Wanning's hair back while he vomited-

Vomit – it surged up as acid in the back of his throat. He swallowed it, along with his frustration. Wang Chuqing had tried to be reassuringly firm, like Rong Yan, but she wasn't Rong Yan. Because Rong Yan was dead, another victim of Chu Wanning's complacency, his gullibility, his inability to recognise the danger other men posed. Wang Chuqing had a loving family, a loving husband, a loving son. She didn't know, *couldn't* know. But it made her the

wrong physician for him, because she had pressed and poked his body, and completely missed the mortal wound.

“No. It doesn’t. I’ve forgiven him, and I don’t care about it.”

“Wanning… Look at me?”

“No.” He creaked upright; he’d humoured her in this farce for long enough, allowed her to see the dried blood on him and exclaim over his fever, but now he had to sleep. Now he needed darkness and silence.

“All right. But wait a moment; Shi Mingjing stole these from the clinic. I don’t think there’s internal bleeding, but I *do* think there’s an infection, and that’s what’s causing your fever. He thinks so too – these are high-strength, broad spectrum antibiotics. You need to take them.”

Chu Wanning deigned to look down at the small pile of boxes amid the discarded wet paper. There were indeed antibiotics. But there were also stool softeners and a tube of haemorrhoid cream.

Rage erupted in him.

“Get out.” He swept them all off the bed. “Get out.”

“Wanning-”

“Now. Get lost.”

“You have to look after-”

“Chuqing, *fuck off*.”

She finally fled. Chu Wanning stared balefully through the open door. Mo Ran came in, aiming for the side of the bed, and stopped when he saw the contents of the pharmacy bag on the floor.

Xue Zhengyong stepped forward into the doorway, and waited until his wife had closed the front door behind her.

“You can stay with us,” he said to Chu Wanning coldly.

“I’m fine.”

“Clearly you’re not. But my wife would want me to extend the invitation. However. Mo Ran is no longer welcome in our house.”

Chu Wanning nodded. *Please don’t leave me alone*, Mo Ran had said. “I understand. Then I cannot.”

“Fine. On behalf of Sisheng University, I accept your resignation,” he said with a voice like stone. “Please don’t contact my son. I’ll tell him.”

Chu Wanning closed his eyes and bowed his head in acceptance.

“Uncle!” Mo Ran shouted. “You can’t! None of this is his fault!”

“And *you*... You. When I want to look at you, or hear what you have to say, I will tell you. Not before. If Dr. Chu thinks staying with you, knowing what you have done, is more important than his health, then I don’t need a faculty member that lacking in good judgement.”

Fair enough, thought Chu Wanning, as his best friend walked out without a backwards glance. There was only so much someone could see of him before this reaction was inevitable, and it seemed that he had finally reached the limits of Xue Zhengyong's tolerance. Fair enough.

Chapter 72: Mad As the Mist and Snow

Chapter Notes

> Oooof, another tricky one, and life has been rough - thank you for your patience! ♥
>
> I must beg it again for the next chapter as well; I am finally going on holiday for a week and taking a much needed break. So instead of replying to any comments you might be kind enough to leave on this one (and comments are always and especially appreciated, as these chapters feel very raw to write!), I'll go straight into writing the next chapter when I return, or it'd be a good three weeks before the next chapter. I hope that's okay! 🤗

If Mo Ran were a good or selfless person, this would have been the moment where he would run after Xue Zhengyong, shouting to him that Mo Ran would leave instead and that Chu Wanning would go with them.

But Mo Ran was not a good or selfless person.

So he let Xue Zhengyong close the door, and he let Chu Wanning watch his best friend turn away from him, and he felt an intoxicating and overwhelming relief that Chu Wanning had chosen him instead.

He wiped the tears from his face with a shaking hand. Chu Wanning had chosen him. So now he needed to look after Chu Wanning, as much as Chu Wanning would let him. He reached back to his childhood, to his dying mother: safety, shelter, water, rest, cleanliness, food, warmth, comfort. The animal things.

Mo Ran put the chain on the door, then the deadbolt, and then he took one of the counter chairs and propped it under the handle.

He went back into the bedroom. Chu Wanning was curled up in as tight a ball as Mo Ran had ever seen him. He forced his heavy bones and cramped muscles to gather up the scattered

medicines and tubes, and found the carnelian necklace in a corner. His eyes were blurring and his hand shaking as he tried to focus on it. Chu Wanning would never want to wear it again.

Mo Ran knew he shouldn't do it, but his body sank down to sit on the end of the bed, too exhausted and leaden to fight gravity any longer. His head was full of grief and his spine full of pain and his throat full of acid and his gut full of guilt.

He had lost everything and everyone he loved, and he blamed no one but himself. He had tried to outrun the consequences of his sick, stupid plan, and had forced everyone around him to bear them instead.

He looked down at the wrinkled white sheets, now marked with grey snow-melt and flakes of dried blood. A week ago, he and Chu Wanning had lain here together, hiding from the cold in the sweet and heavy aftermath of pleasure, softly teasing…

Mo Ran woke up with a start. On the streets he had learnt how to come straight to consciousness and instant lucidity, with no sleepiness or confusion, and this was how he woke now – one moment in the weak daylight, and then in tumultuous slate-blue duskiness. The slanting snow had turned into a true mountain storm, battering the window and howling through the street below in a dark blizzard.

It was so loud that it took him a second to hear the other noise in the room over it: Chu Wanning's breath shivering out. Mo Ran scrambled to turn on a lamp, and his self-directed fury could have immolated himself when he saw the sweat-damp, fever-flushed face, the fluttering eyelashes, the grey, cracked lips. He was no medic, but he didn't need to be. Shit. *Shit.*

"Wanning," he said, shaking his shoulder. Chu Wanning slowly opened his eyes. "Wanning, *baobei*, you need some antibiotics. You need some water."

Chu Wanning stared blearily at him.

Mo Ran re-evaluated and went to the kitchen. The tap water in the mountains wasn't potable, so Chu Wanning had made his own variation of a water cooler on the kitchen counter that the

large five-gallon bottles could be easily slotted into, next to his electric kettle. Mo Ran filled a glass and hurried back, locating the antibiotics and popping a couple of pills out of the blister pack.

Chu Wanning turned his head away from them, frowning as Mo Ran pulled him up into a sitting position and reaching for the water instead.

“Pills first,” Mo Ran said, hating himself. “Antibiotics, then water.”

It took some coaxing, but Chu Wanning eventually swallowed both. Mo Ran tried not to think that if he were not so thirsty and were he more lucid, he would probably be less eager to take a drink from Mo Ran.

“That’s good, that’s good,” he said, leaning Chu Wanning back against the headboard. “I’ll fill another. And I’ll run a nice warm bath, you’ll- you’ll feel so much better then. Nice and warm and clean.”

It only took the thirty seconds to refill the glass and return to the bedroom for Chu Wanning to have curled up again, pressing his face into the pillow as though that would protect him. Mo Ran started running a bath instead – what did you do for a fever? Sweat it out, right?

He went back into the kitchen and boiled the kettle. Bengal rose tea, with plenty of honey. That would warm him. That was sweet.

He’d never replaced that fucking mug.

Mo Ran bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood, while the kettle bubbled away obliviously.

Nice and warm, Mo Ran had promised, nice and warm. Not… not whatever he’d endured over the last week. He didn’t *know*, that was the worst thing (well, not the worst thing, but definitely a *bad thing*), so he didn’t know what to avoid, what opposite to conjure.

Chu Wanning had said they'd used padded straps, like in a mental hospital.

They'd kept him tied to a bed.

It made sense then, why he'd be curled up so tight, hiding his vulnerable abdomen and face, instead of pinned down, on show.

Something snapped in him then, and the mewling timidity, the fear, the heartbreak – they were all washed away in possessive fury. He remembered the awful day this had all begun, Chu Wanning staring at him with a curled lip and saying in that old acidic tone: *"I am the villain of the piece."*

Mo Ran was the villain of the piece, and Mo Ran was already a piece of shit who didn't care about Chu Wanning's agency and consent. So he'd be the villain now.

He picked Chu Wanning up, ignoring his huff of irritation and the dismissive wave of his hand. He'd seen his aunt ignore it, and Xue Zhengyong had still gone home with *her*.

And then, as he'd known he would, Chu Wanning relaxed in the heat of the swiftly-filling bath. Mo Ran peeled the teal jumper off him first, and went blind at the sight of the bruises on his skin, the spectrum of red and violet and green and yellow telling him that there had not been a single incident.

"Whose is this?"

Chu Wanning blinked at the sodden mass of green. "Shi Mingjing's…?"

Mo Ran dumped it into the bathroom bin. "I'm taking your trousers off," he said, brooking no argument. "Are they his too?"

“Well, they’re not *mine*,” Chu Wanning slurred in a sudden, brief moment of lucidity, and his offended indignation nearly undid Mo Ran.

These went into the bin as welll. Chu Wanning wasn’t wearing any underwear, and his hips were marked with vivid bruises.

Were his heart not locked away behind his rage, it would have broken by the way Chu Wanning didn’t even cover himself up, didn’t hiss or tell Mo Ran to piss off. Instead his fingers tapped against the surface of the rippling water, *tap tap tap*, as it began to steam.

“I’m going to sort out your hair. Lean forward,” Mo Ran said, refusing to wonder when Chu Wanning did.

“Scissors…”

“What?”

“To cut it…”

“I’m not cutting off your hair,” Mo Ran said firmly.

“Cut it off…”

“No. If you want to cut it off next week, then we will. But not tonight.”

He ran conditioner over the matted patch of hair at the back of Chu Wanning’s head, a trick that his mother had taught him in how to deal with long hair.

“I’m going to make it hurt as little as possible,” he said. “If it pulls, tell me.”

“Tell me…” Chu Wanning said, closing his eyes and curling on his side, balancing his temple on a bar of soap on the side of the bathtub. “Tell me. Tell me.”

Mo Ran combed out the large knot. There were tendrils in the water, rosewood-coloured particles that he realised were dried blood washing off Chu Wanning. But no fresh vermillion. He’d take what he could get.

His back screamed when he stood up to grab the shower head. He remembered washing his mother’s hair, when her legs were bad, and the restaurant owner’s wife took pity on them or just grew tired of the smell, and let them use their shower. Shampoo just on the scalp, not on the lengths: a cat’s lick and a promise. The promise most of all.

Chu Wanning’s eyes were already closed, so Mo Ran rinsed all the suds out, and drew the brush through the shining river of obsidian. It’d be sweaty again by the morning, but he wanted Chu Wanning to know that every part of him was precious, every part of him was worth the inconvenience, and his hair was something to be protected, not cut off and tossed away.

He left Chu Wanning just for a few seconds, plagued with images of him sinking under the water, and found clean underwear and his winter flannel pyjamas. He’d laughed at them the first time he saw them, at how old-fashioned and buttoned-up they were, but now he couldn’t think of anything better.

They smelt of the sandalwood sachet Mo Ran had placed in the drawers.

It was at that moment that he realised his idiotic mistake. He’d been so concerned with *Chu Wanning – Clean* that he’d blanked on *Chu Wanning – Warm.*

Stupid. Why was he so fucking *stupid?*

Because he hadn’t just been being stupid. He’d been insane with the thought of Hua Binan’s touch on Chu Wanning’s skin. Everything else had paled into insignificance next to that

outrage.

Mo Ran knew there was no chance in hell that he'd own a hairdryer. He tried ransacking the small bathroom anyway, but in vain; it was futile to hope that Chu Wanning might own a. an object of outright vanity, and b. a *loud* object of outright vanity.

"Okay, Plan B," he said, forcing Chu Wanning to stand and giving him the world's least sexy rub-down with a towel.

Wuchang might have been right on the Qin-Huai line, and in the appropriately named 'Great Snow Mountains' to boot, but according to Beijing they were southerners, and so with regards to central heating they could go fuck themselves. Chu Wanning, like Mo Ran (and unlike the rich Xues), made do with electric blankets and space heaters. So Mo Ran bundled Chu Wanning up on his ridiculous winter pyjamas and buried him under the duvet.

Chu Wanning, clearly delirious, made a soft noise of protest as Mo Ran moved away from him, and despite his better judgement, Mo Ran kissed his forehead.

"Just one second, *baobei*, just want to warm this place up." Having spent November and the beginning of December in Shanghai, Chu Wanning hadn't had a chance to bring out his fan heater. Their one night together had been very warm under the covers, and the next night… the next night, Mo Ran had felt perversely grateful for the chill, mimicking what he thought Chu Wanning might be enduring in a police cell.

Still, from his summer renovation, he knew exactly where the fan heater was. He took the box down from the top of the wardrobe, pulled it out, and plugged it in.

He held his own hands to the blast of hot air and tried to steady his breathing. He was free. Chu Wanning was free. They might be hurt and they might be alone, but they were free and together and *alive*.

"No… no…"

Mo Ran looked around just as Chu Wanning kicked off the duvet. He sat up strangely: a violent movement from the waist, not pushing himself up with his arms. He looked around in shocked confusion, and his gaze fell on Mo Ran.

"No!"

Chu Wanning launched himself out of the bed just as Mo Ran instinctively moved to comfort him; their heads knocked together with teeth-rattling force and Chu Wanning pitched out of the bed right on top of him.

"You can't be here! Mo Ran, no, *no,* you can't be here!" Chu Wanning half-sobbed, half-shouted. "No, no, no!"

The sudden unexpected rejection, after Chu Wanning had been so docile and pliant in the bath, crashed into Mo Ran's heart with all the force of meteor. "You said I could stay," he said, and heard the voice of a child instead of his own.

It's unfair. You said I could stay. I need to stay with you.

"No, no, you can't stay here!" Chu Wanning said. He was scrabbling at Mo Ran's chest, trying to push him towards the door. He looked around wildly, at the window, at the walls. "Where are- Has he moved us? How did he find you? His sister- Did his sister-?"

His sister? "Wait, wait," Mo Ran said, "Wanning. I'm not… Where are we?"

"I don't know." Chu Wanning's face creased as he looked towards the window, and frowned. "To the south? But it was…"

Then he pulled back, and hid his face in his arms. "No, please, *Mo Ran*-"

That voice, saying his name… Not his name. That was the thing. His name, and not his name. A fake name, a stolen name, but a name made real and true only by *this* voice, only by *this* exhortation. He'd never had a proper surname, but hearing these two syllables felt right, felt true, felt real.

"I'm here," he said, and pulled Chu Wanning to his chest. "I'm here. What's wrong? I just want you to be warm, just want you to be comfortable…"

"Stupid! How can- Mo Ran, we have to go, we have to- how did-?" Chu Wanning shook his head, lightly slapping Mo Ran's jaw with a wet lock of hair. "He said he'd make you come here, and I said you wouldn't, but- but how did he find you?"

Here – *make you come here?*

It wasn't "*You* can't be here."

It was "You can't be *here*."

"We're in your flat," Mo Ran said.

"No, no, the heater, I heard the heater!"

"The… the heater?"

"He always has the heater on, I heard it, it's, I can hear it, he's coming-"

"No." Mo Ran turned it off. "See? No heater. Use your eyes instead. It's your flat." He crushed Chu Wanning to himself. "Look, look over my shoulder. There's your *jian*, on the wall. Your scrolls. You're safe, Wanning, *baobei,* you're safe, I promise. We're both safe."

“No,” Chu Wanning moaned against his throat. “No.”

“We are. I promise. I promise.”

“What does that mean?” Chu Wanning whispered, and Mo Ran couldn’t answer him.

Mo Ran squeezed him tightly instead. Chu Wanning was shaking, with fear or fever or both.

“He said…” he hissed in Mo Ran’s ear, his breath hot and wet with swallowed sobs. “He said that he’d bring you here, bring you there. That he’d make you watch. Make me watch. Make you… He’d make you make me.”

“No,” Mo Ran swore. “*No.*”

“He said he’d done it before and he could do it again, that it was easy,” Chu Wanning wept against his neck, and gouged Mo Ran’s heart out of his throat.

Fuck. *Fuck*. Because Hua Binan, the sick, evil bastard, was right. He had done it before. And it had been easy for him.

“I’m so sorry.” He should let go of Chu Wanning, should stop the rotten filth of his soul from touching him, but Chu Wanning was clinging to him, fingers digging painfully into the muscles of his back.

“He said he’d find Xue Meng too! That he’d make *him* watch, then he’d skin him, burn him, and I couldn’t do anything, I couldn’t get free. He’d make me watch him kill Meng’er, and frame you for it – he said that he’d find- find and kill- I tried, Mo Ran! I tried to get free, I promise, I tried, I tried-”

Mo Ran swallowed his own tears. They tasted like battery acid. “I know. I know, Wanning, *baobei*, I know. Of course you tried. You’d have kicked his ass in a second if he wasn’t being

such a coward. I know that. Come on."

"He… Mo Ran…"

Mo Ran raised his hand to cradle the back of Chu Wanning's head. The wet hair was painfully cold to the touch.

"It's all right, I know, we just need to get you warm and into bed-"

"He did things. He… Mo Ran… I didn't want him to. Please…"

Mo Ran closed his eyes and tried not to die. "I *know*. I know. My poor love. I'll say it as many times as you need, I promise. I promise. But you need to sleep. You need to be warm. Come on. I'm going to give you some painkillers and some water, yeah? Then you can- then we can sleep."

"Will you stay?" Chu Wanning asked, almost inaudible.

"Stupid." Mo Ran pressed a harsh kiss to his temple. "Now who's stupid? You won't be able to get rid of me."

The storm was still swirling almost an hour later, when Mo Ran had finally navigated painkillers and water and the duvet. Chu Wanning kept kicking it off, and Mo Ran vaguely realised that he must be reassuring himself that his legs were working and unbound. He kept trying to sit up, thinking in his febrile delirium that Hua Binan was in the other room, or that Mo Ran was still at the police station.

The room was freezing. The fan heater was not an option. Even the duvet wouldn't last the night.

Chu Wanning's teeth were chattering. There was a line in between his eyebrows.

And… And he had asked Wang Chuqing not to touch him. But he'd never actually said that to Mo Ran, had he? He'd let Mo Ran undress him and wash his hair and had clung to him…

But Mo Ran didn't trust himself anymore. After all, when Shi Mei had told him those lies a year ago, Mo Ran had convinced himself that seducing and ruining Chu Wanning was a perfectly clever and reasonable plan, when it was just Mo Ran's own filthy obsession and hatred masquerading under a cloak of self-righteousness. So this… wasn't this idea, so blindingly obvious to him, just an excuse to spend one more night with Chu Wanning before he was lucid enough to throw him away?

"Wanning?" he said as softly as he could over the sound of the blizzard. "Wanning, are you cold?"

Chu Wanning's eyes cracked open at that, and he looked so unimpressed that Mo Ran wanted to laugh until he cried.

"I mean… Would you be happy for me to get into the bed with you? You'd… We'd both be warmer, and then we don't have to have the fan heater on…"

The only light in the room was from the bedside lantern: a very warm light, softened by the paper shade around it. Mo Ran knew that Chu Wanning had made it himself, constructing the frame, writing out the Heart Sutra, mounting the shade. In its glow, Chu Wanning's eyes had slowly grown wider and wider.

"… happy?"

Mo Ran's attempted smile died. "No – no, right. I'm sorry, what the fuck am I saying? Of course you wouldn't be…"

"Wouldn't be happy? Oh, Mo Ran…" Chu Wanning closed his eyes again, but in the lamplight Mo Ran saw the tear track down his cheek, in the cold air he saw the broken breath

of weeping. They weren't the terrified sobs of earlier. These tears were the slow, quiet waters of heartbreak. "You made me so happy."

His good intentions flew away down the streets of Wuchang, carried on the icy mountain winds. All he knew was that not holding Chu Wanning would kill him, and with all the purity of an animal's instinct for self-preservation he crawled into the bed like a dog, and pulled his trembling lord and master into his arms.

Chapter 73: The Weariness, the Fever, and the Fret

Chapter Notes

> Hello! I am back from a few days of sea and sun and architecture! Thank you for your patience in waiting for this chapter and for forgiving my lack of replies to the last chapter - I read and reread every comment about a hundred times while I was away! 💖

He is in a bed with Mo Ran.

If Mo Ran is here, then… Then. He can't think. Consciousness is a slippery thing, shimmering with steam like a desert mirage, impossible to hold. Chills shiver through his body, and his spine is hot with pain.

"Mo Ran…" he whispers. He has to stay conscious, just for a few seconds. "You have to go. Have to… He's going to hurt Xue Meng. You have to protect Xue Meng."

"Xue Meng's fine," Mo Ran says, stroking a wet strand of hair back from his face. "He's absolutely fine. You're the one I need to look after."

He shakes his head, and it awakens a salvo in his ears. "Going to hurt you and Xue Meng. He doesn't know – have to look after him. You have to protect Xue Meng!"

Mo Ran sighs. It's a small sigh, one that he is trying to hide. "All right. All right, sweetheart. I'll just stay here until you fall asleep, and then I'll go and find Xue Meng."

He feels a relief more potent than a drug. "Thank you. Thank you. My Mo Ran… You, you mustn't trust Hua Binan. I know he seems soft and kind, but he's- he's a- He'll hurt you. He hates you. And I know you love Shi Mingjing-"

“I don’t,” Mo Ran replies, suddenly furious. “I *hate* him.”

And that makes sense, because why would Mo Ran be in bed with him, if he loved Shi Mingjing? Unless Chu Wanning was just something that…

No. No, he remembered now. It was to frame him, and support Shi Mingjing.

“He lies,” he whispers. “You love him, but he- You won’t believe me. You won’t believe me. But he’s lying to you.”

“I know. I know.”

“Don’t trust them. Don’t trust them. Don’t trust the police. You need to… You promise not to trust them?”

“I promise. And to look after Xue Meng.”

He can close his eyes then. “Yes. Xue Meng…”

*

He is in a bed with Mo Ran.

This evokes multiple feelings: grief, joy, tenderness, fear. But the sensation of pain overwhelms them all, casts red light across everything. The pain is like fire in his hips, crashing up his spine and down his legs in waves.

He tries not to make a noise, but one escapes him, because Mo Ran blinks himself awake.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he lies, and feels a bubble of hysteria in his throat.

Mo Ran lays a cool hand across his forehead. “You’re still hot… Let me get you some water.” He sits up, and the movement of the bed pitches him – even that small twist is blinding.

Mo Ran switches on the light and studies his face. “Are you all right? Is the pain bad?”

How does Mo Ran know about the pain? He’s not told Mo Ran what happened, he’s sure of that. Mo Ran can never know. “No…”

“*Baobei*… I already know you’re brave. The bravest man in the world. But I need to know if it hurts, so I can give you the right painkillers.”

Chu Wanning squeezes his eyes shut. “Don’t need them.”

“No. No, I know you don’t. So stoic. But I’ll feel bad if I don’t give them to you. So, if it’s a number? One to ten?”

“… seven.”

“Seven, okay. Okay. You’re doing so well.” He hears Mo Ran popping pills from their pack. “The water’s cold; do you want me to boil some instead?”

Chu Wanning shakes his head. He feels hot anyway, and the pain is more immediate.

Mo Ran comes back and sits in the bed beside him, pulling him up so that he can drink more easily. First there's agony as his pelvis shifts, and then there's warmth, the firm flesh of Mo Ran at his back, and the relaxation that comes with it. Then the desperate guilt for that relaxation, because he is not allowed to touch Mo Ran – he thought he could, for a while, but now he can't, so he tries to struggle away.

"They're pills, they're not bitter, don't worry."

"Not allowed. Can't touch – not allowed to touch. You don't- not…"

Mo Ran is silent for a moment. Then he stuns Chu Wanning by reaching up under the hem of his shirt and placing his hand flat across his abdomen, like a cool, solid anchor, bracing him.

"If it's not allowed, then I'm doing it first. I'm the one touching. Deliberately. So if there's touching, it's my fault, okay? You're not responsible."

This doesn't quite make sense, but the relief these words bring help more than the painkillers possibly could. "Shameless…"

He turns his head and presses his face against the plane of Mo Ran's throat, and that's allowed now, because Mo Ran is taking responsibility for any touch between them, so if he weeps into Mo Ran's neck, that's still less bad than that hand on his abdomen, right? One could be accidental, but one is blatant and intentional, which means it's more wrong, and so Chu Wanning is absolved of this crime, the egregious and heinous sin of clinging to Mo Ran while he gives him the pills, and solemnly presses the glass to his lips like it's the nuptial cup.

*

He is in a bed with Mo Ran.

Mo Ran is dying. He is sure of it – Hua Binan gave Mu Yanli a poison, so that if their plan to frame Mo Ran failed then Hua Binan could still be sure that he wouldn't survive. And

trusting Mo Ran would have drunk it without thinking, like Chu Wanning had. He'd had always thought that he was jaded and cynical, but the last few months have shown him that he was a fool instead.

If he falls asleep, Mo Ran will die, he's sure of it. And he doesn't want Mo Ran to die. He wants Mo Ran to live for decades, happy and healthy, with his family. If Mo Ran survives, Chu Wanning will leave, he promises. Just let Mo Ran live.

He lies with his ear on Mo Ran's chest, keeping track of his own life by the beats of Mo Ran's heart.

Each exhalation is like a knife between his ribs, for fear it might be the last. Every inhalation is like cool water in his throat, because it means that Mo Ran will live for another few seconds. It feels like seconds are all he can beg the universe for.

Don't die. Don't die. Please, please*, don't die.*

He must be saying it, because Mo Ran murmurs beneath his cheek. "Whose dying? No one's dying."

"Don't die. Promise me. Promise me you won't die." What poison is it? Mo Ran doesn't seem to be in pain. Is it the succinylcholine? He knows the syllables now, they are engraved on his cortex, they come more easily than breath or tears. Will Mo Ran stop breathing and suffocate, conscious and afraid? "I love you. I love you. Please don't die. Mo Ran, I love you. I'll always love you. Please don't leave me. Don't die…"

"I won't. No one's dying. I promise, Wanning." Mo Ran shifts, and Chu Wanning feels his arm heavy across his back. "Go back to sleep. *Pain, pain, go away…*"

The words and the tune are like a lightning strike to the centre of his brain.

He remembers next to nothing of the time before he went to the Children's Institute: a handful of images, no more.

One of these was of wooden walls. He sat on a cotton quilt, faded and worn. It had once been printed with red flowers; now they were pink. A yellow plastic bowl with a green rim and a white rabbit in the centre.

There was blood on his hand. He didn't cry. But a woman's voice came from above him as he rocked back and forth, back and forth, and a wizened, red-raw hand stuck a plaster on his own.

"*Pain, pain, go away, don't come back another day*. What a brave boy you are for your *laolao*. There. Mama's back soon, and I'll tell her what a good boy you've been."

However good he'd been, however brave, it hadn't been enough for his mama.

Two orphans, vulnerable and alone, set apart from society for reasons of disability or poverty, used and exploited and hurt instead of protected and cherished.

And somehow they had found each other.

He presses his face to Mo Ran's chest, and counts his heartbeats, and wants to die.

*

It was the light that reassured him. A clear, rarified light – snowlight, he realised, without needing to see the snow itself. One of his very favourite kinds of light: cold but gentle, the hint of blue, somehow both soft and crystalline. Like snow itself.

Something as delicate as snowlight wouldn't have been able to pierce the metal shutters. The immaculate expanse of it across the wall was unmarked by the slashing shadows of window

bars.

He had thought that he would never see this again.

Chu Wanning steeled himself against the pain he knew would come, and shifted up against the headboard. Then there was the sound of a door opening, and he froze as he looked up, eyes wide, fingers outstretched, heart pounding-

It wasn't Hua Binan. It *shouldn't* have been Hua Binan, in this light, with the calligraphy and paintings on the walls, but it could have been.

But it wasn't. It was Mo Ran.

"You're awake!" He was wearing a wrinkled shirt and trousers, and had the blanket that Chu Wanning kept on the back of the sofa wrapped around his shoulders like a cloak. His hair was standing on end, and there were deep shadows under his eyes. But there was undisguised joy on Mo Ran's face, making his dimples deepen, and he was *alive*, safe and alive, not stabbed or poisoned like some part of Chu Wanning had feared.

Then he remembered everything else.

He looked down at the floor, and carefully swung his legs out from under the duvet. The air in the flat was freezing.

"Do you want to go to the bathroom? Here, let me help-"

"No need." Chu Wanning bit on the inside of his cheek, but he was sure that he had managed to keep his face relatively still.

"Okay. I'll get the next dose of antibiotics and some hot water."

The sheer confidence in Mo Ran's voice made Chu Wanning's intended response of "I'm fine, get out" feel ridiculous. Because in reality, the last thing he wanted was for Mo Ran to leave. He was sure that the second Mo Ran was out of his sight, Hua Binan would spring.

So he didn't tell Mo Ran to leave, despite the order on his tongue – it would be a desperate grab at some kind of dignity, that was all. What dignity did he have left to save?

Hua Binan may have taken the citadel of his integrity (if, depending on what Lawrence had meant, Mo Ran hadn't taken it already), but at least the walls of the bedroom had gone unbreached, and this inner sanctum uninvaded. He saw the bathtub and the damp clothes peeking out of the lidded bin, and remembered with mortification that Mo Ran had given him a bath the night before. Gratitude warred with humiliation, and to avoid being overwhelmed he placed both emotions high out of reach.

He tried to tell himself that he was glad to finally perform his ablutions on his own terms and in his own time, with his own toothpaste and toothbrush, but as he brushed his teeth and stared into the mirror, he was faced with the strangest phenomenon.

Usually when he looked at his reflection, he felt anger or despair. But today he felt nothing whatsoever, other than a vague unease, because he simply did not recognise himself in the mirror. The stranger mimicked his movements, brushed his teeth, had damp hair and a white face and darkened eyes, had bruises and the same scar as him at the hairline of the left temple, but other than that… A perfect stranger.

Still, right now, he'd take the numb discomfort over the glass-shattering hatred.

When he walked slowly back into the bedroom, Mo Ran was waiting with a glass of hot water and a handful of pills. Chu Wanning made him wait as he returned to the bed, face carefully still, back straight.

Why was he so exhausted? He'd lain in a bed for more than a week. He had no excuse to be so tired.

“What are those?”

“The white ones are antibiotics. The pink ones are painkillers. The white and blue ones are anti-inflammatories.”

Chu Wanning sighed and held out his hand.

Mo Ran hesitated. “I… I should have brought the packet. Sorry – I’ll throw these away and you can pop them out.”

“Don’t be stupid,” he said flatly. “I trust you.”

“Um.” Mo Ran tipped the pills into his hand. The surface of the water rippled in the glass. “Thank you, I mean. But-”

“You made a mistake. I know you won’t do it again,” Chu Wanning said, and took the antibiotics. The heat of the water made swallowing it easier.

“Wanning. It was more than a mistake.”

“A grave mistake,” he replied. Anti-inflammatories. “But as I said. I know you won’t do it again.”

“But it-!” Mo Ran looked visibly frustrated. “You absolutely exploded on me when I cheated in an exam! You said that I was *beyond remedy* when I copied someone’s abstract. You’d shout if I so much as swore in the lab, but for this… Wanning. I committed a crime. I drugged you. I sexually assaulted you.”

“Stop.” Chu Wanning managed to dart a glance up at Mo Ran. “*Please.* Stop.”

That silenced him. Chu Wanning swallowed the painkillers and focused on not spilling the water. “It’s freezing in here. I have a fan heater.”

“You got upset last night,” Mo Ran said in a tiny voice. “You said Hua Binan had… That the sound…”

“… oh.” That made sense, but he hated that he could barely remember it. The words felt familiar, but the memory was beyond his grasp.

“I’ve ordered two oil radiators instead. Fastest delivery. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

“What about you?” He suddenly realised that Mo Ran was wearing the blanket because none of Chu Wanning’s clothes would fit him.

“I’m fine.”

“But you…” But what? Was he going to ask Mo Ran to leave and go back to his own flat? That felt like a death sentence. Just like staying in this Hua-Binan-stained flat did. “But… I don’t know what…”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Mo Ran said softly. “Let me make you something to eat. You should be taking the antibiotics with food anyway. When was the last time you ate?”

“I don’t know. There was broth… Some kind of, I don’t know. It was like a milkshake.”

Mo Ran frowned. “What about solid food?”

“It’s in the bowl by my computer.”

“Wh… what?”

Mo Ran didn’t know. Chu Wanning had no intention of telling him. But a decent deceit evaded him. “I’m not hungry,” he lied instead. Then he told the truth. “I… don’t want to eat anything.”

He was expecting Mo Ran to try to persuade him, to sigh in relief that it was another chore he didn’t have to do, perhaps to say that he was hungry anyway even if Chu Wanning wasn’t.

He didn’t expect for Mo Ran’s face to twist, so violently that for a second Chu Wanning didn’t recognise him.

Mo Ran opened his mouth to speak, but then a shrill tone made them both jump. It was Mo Ran’s phone, Chu Wanning realised; Hua Binan had taken his.

“Who is it?” he said, leaning forward despite the pain it sparked. “Is it… Is it your uncle…?”

“Shit.” Mo Ran shook his head. “It’s Nangong Si. Shit – I need to let him know.”

“Don’t tell him,” Chu Wanning asked instantly. “Don’t… Say I was arrested. Like Ya’an.”

Mo Ran shook his head. “He knows it was something else; he’s the one who found out for us that you hadn’t been…”

Would Hua Binan go so far as to target Nangong Si instead? How much had he known about Nangong Xi’s affairs? “Then tell him not to trust Hua Binan or Mu Yanli. But not to investigate them either. Just to leave things alone. Tell him…”

How embarrassing it was. To think of Nangong Si in contact with Mo Ran, them discussing an arrest, whether it was the People’s Police or the Ministry of State Security, and all along, all their anxiety had been caused by Chu Wanning and his student, a student with some

twisted obsession of lust or resentment or hatred, or some other motivation that Chu Wanning had no words for.

Then he realised.

Wang Chuqing had known. *Shi Mingjing told my husband what Hua Binan did to you. You're not shocking my delicate feminine sensibilities*.

Mo Ran had said that he'd been there.

The bath, Shi Mingjing's wet clothes in the bin beside it. Mo Ran would have seen the marks on him.

He felt all the blood drain from his head and nausea overwhelmed him.

"Mo Ran. What… What did Shi Mingjing say happened?"

And Mo Ran's face told him the answer.

Chapter 74: Confiteor Iterum

“I’m flying down.”

“Seriously, don’t,” Mo Ran whispered into his mobile. The congee he was making bubbled angrily at him, making the same kind of noises Chu Wanning would make if he knew he was talking to Nangong Si. “He’s all right – I mean, he’s not, he’s, er, had the shit beaten out of him. But you know what he’s like. He hates the idea of causing such a fuss.”

“*’Causing such a fuss’* – you’re as crazy as he is. I don’t get it – the ‘Hanlin’ my uncle- our uncle mentioned is Hua Binan, who is one of Chu Wanning’s old doctoral students. He was the one who was all about ‘justice for BBS victims’, but Chu Wanning’s always been all about that, so why would he want to hurt him?”

“He…” Mo Ran lowered his voice even further. “He was obsessed with him. Like… *obsessed*. He told Nangong Xu that they were going to fucking ride off into the sunset together or something, I don’t know. And obviously Chu Wanning told him to go to hell, and that pissed him off. Hell hath no fury like a psychopath scorned…”

“Is that why he wanted to frame you? To get you out of the picture?”

“I guess so,” Mo Ran said delicately. “And that cop was the sister, Mu Yanli.”

“And their little brother was your friend. Fucking hell… At least Mu Yanli should be easy enough to bring down, if she was using the police systems.”

“You can’t. Chu Wanning made some kind of a deal with her. He wouldn’t say a word to anyone, and in exchange… I mean. I wouldn’t be arrested and shivved on Day One. It’s his choice.”

“A fucking crime’s been committed – *thousands* of crimes, if Hua Binan’s up to his eyeballs in drugs and counterfeit medications. It’s not his choice.”

“It fucking is,” Mo Ran hissed. “I swear, Nangong Si, if you go over his head on this… You just can’t. I think if this all came out he might… He would… He’s not in a good way.”

That was the understatement of the century. Chu Wanning hadn’t said a word to him since he realised that Shi Mei had told Mo Ran what had happened; Mo Ran had left him curled up under the duvet, staring at the wall.

“You mean he…?”

“I mean, work it out, genius.” Mo Ran was losing patience. “I wouldn’t have told you a word of this, except I wanted to make sure you and Ye Wangxi knew not to trust any of the three of them if they reached out or something. Don’t tell anyone. Don’t investigate it. Just look after her and yourself and let Chu Wanning call the shots.”

“I don’t like this.”

Mo Ran nearly told him to fuck himself. “Yeah, none of us do. I’ve got to go. I’m cooking.”

“Okay. When he’s awake, could you ask him to give me a-”

Mo Ran hung up.

He stirred the congee. He’d included the dried prawns that Chu Wanning liked, along with some garlic and ginger and scallions from the last time he’d cooked in this flat, in the hope of convincing him to eat something solid. He’d intended to whisk together some soy sauce and honey to really turn up the temptation, but he half-suspected that Chu Wanning would throw the bowl at him or at the wall when Mo Ran presented it to him along with a sensible stool softener, and soy sauce was a pain in the arse- was a pain in the neck to clean up.

Carrying a bowl and a glass of warm water, he knocked with his knuckle on the door. “Wanning…?”

There was no answer. He hadn’t been expecting one.

He opened the door slowly, as though that was more polite. “I’ve got some congee, with the prawns you like…”

Chu Wanning didn’t so much as glance at him.

Would he have ever told Mo Ran, what Hua Binan had done? Mo Ran honestly didn’t know.

He’d confessed it, when the sound of the fan heater had triggered something, as though begging forgiveness for a shameful sin. But conscious? No. Never in a million years.

Mo Ran felt anger flare in his chest, just for a second, that Chu Wanning wouldn’t trust him with something like that, trust him to look after him and protect him and wreak vengeance on the men who had hurt him.

How galling it was, he thought, that it had been Shi Mei who had told him, who had thrown the words at him like weapons.

But then… that was how Chu Wanning had found out, wasn’t it? Told that he’d been manipulated and drugged and assaulted by his own lover.

The anger died. Mo Ran had no right to ever feel anger at Chu Wanning’s distrust of him.

“Wanning… Can I ask you something?”

There was no reply. Mo Ran gingerly sat on the bed. “I mean, to do something, not a question. I’ve no right to ask you to do anything, but I… If I talk to you, would you listen to me? I should have done it months ago; I should never have needed to. But… Please can I tell you everything that happened?”

Chu Wanning finally turned his head, and his blank, dead gaze fell on Mo Ran.

“There’s no need,” he said, in a voice like crumbling stone. “I’m not a police officer.”

“You’re certainly not.” Mo Ran chanced a smile. “But… please?”

Chu Wanning didn’t reply. Not verbally. But something like acquiescence settled in his eyes.

There was no precis this time, no abstract or panel presentation. Mo Ran was on his own.

He’d thought he’d begin with the day one year before, with Shi Mei’s lie. Instead, he surprised them both.

“I remember the first time I ever saw you. It was the spring I’d arrived in Sichuan, and Xue Meng’s tutor had arrived. He was waiting in the garden. And I saw you there, under the apple tree. And I couldn’t believe it. I thought that you were an angel. You were the most beautiful person I’d ever seen. And then Xue Meng shouted ‘Chu-*laoshi*!’ and you turned around, and your eyes… I thought they looked so kind. You looked so… *gentle*, there under all the white blossoms.”

“Mo Ran…”

“No, no. I should have said all this… I thought you must be a university student, if you were Xue Meng’s tutor. And I begged you to let me be your student too. You nearly bolted. But it was the first time I’d ever asked the Xues for anything, so they kept asking, and eventually…”

“The *gaokao*.” Chu Wanning’s voice was a whisper.

“You said you’d teach me for one year. Just so that I could do the *gaokao*. I don’t know how you managed to teach me ten years’ worth of stuff in one, but getting over 500 meant I could be accepted into Sisheng without the nepotism being *too* blatant. And… in some ways, that was the best year of my life. I felt as though I was becoming a new person, almost? And my brain…. Suddenly it was alive again. And *you*… The best part of every day was when you came to the house. I counted down the minutes until you came back.”

Mo Ran swallowed. “And then I went to university. And it stopped. You didn’t teach first years, and suddenly everyone else had you and I didn’t. I felt like everyone in the world got to see you and speak to you, while I was grasping at scraps. And the novelty and relief at living with the Xues was wearing off, and instead I was feeling more and more resentful at everyone around me. Complaining about their parents demanding they visit more for dinner. Comparing the latest phones. Bitching about this and that, just taking everything for granted. They all looked down on me, I knew it – I was older than them all and knew less. I started having dreams about the fire again, about Mo Guiying and Mo Nian. Dreams about my mother. Dreams about you. That you hated me too.”

He’d sworn to himself that he wouldn’t demand anything from Chu Wanning, but he was a liar after all – he couldn’t stop himself from looking at Chu Wanning, from wordlessly pleading for reassurance.

Chu Wanning’s voice was exhausted. “Of course I didn’t hate you. You were… I thought that the arrow doesn’t miss the bow, does it? I’d done my duty, and I didn’t want to impose myself on you. I didn’t want you to feel beholden.”

Mo Ran tried to smile. Being imposed on by Chu Wanning was bliss.

“I was asked out by the most beautiful girl in Sisheng. I was pretty sure I was gay, but I thought maybe it was because I hadn’t tried having a proper girlfriend, so I said yes. Suddenly everyone wanted to be my friend. I started getting cocky about it. Finally, people were treating me like I wasn’t just some street dog-” He held out his hand. “I *know* you never did. But… You know. It was different. It was flattery, I suppose.”

“It’s a very, very rare and special person who isn’t taken in by smiles and flattery…” Chu Wanning said, very softly. It had the cadence of a quotation.

“What book is that from?”

“Not a book. Rong Yan said it to me. The night she died.”

The night she was murdered by her husband. Mo Ran’s father. Perhaps genetics had outed then – perhaps he had inherited the hunger for admiration and popularity and power.

“I remember seeing you together,” Chu Wanning said.

“What – Song Quitong?”

“I didn’t know her name. But I assume so.”

Mo Ran nodded. “My longest relationship. She dumped me at the beginning of my third year. I was taking your civil engineering class, and she said that I didn’t have any time for her. All I could think about was impressing you. In our last fight, she literally said ‘You think about Chu Wanning more than you think about me!’ I was such a bastard to her. I said, ‘If you pick any rando on the street, I probably think about them more than I think about you.’ I fucking hated her for a while afterwards, but looking back she had a shit time. I realised that she was in that rich set because of her looks; her own background wasn’t quite as bad as mine, but getting there. She wanted to marry rich, to get out of her family, to have some money when she was older… Don’t get me wrong, she was a bitch, but that’s hardly the most heinous crime in the world. We were the same, really. Trading in perceptions to try to steal some security for ourselves, some *place* in the scheme of things. And however bad she was, I was worse.”

He nearly didn’t continue. But this could be his only time to confess to Chu Wanning, and he needed to tell him everything. Nothing held back this time, for someone else to shank him with later.

“They didn’t like you. Too strict. No interest in bribes. And to impress them, those pieces of shit, I’m the one who first called you the Sexless Savant.”

Chu Wanning’s eyes widened; such a small detail, to be so hurt by, in the scheme of things, but Mo Ran knew Chu Wanning’s vulnerabilities now.

He wiped his face. “Yeah. I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t mean it the way you think; I thought that you not having any interest in me wouldn’t hurt as much if you had no interest in *anyone*, you know? So I made it your fault. Your issue. Because I couldn’t cope with… I only took engineering so that I could be taught by you again. But it felt like the closer I wanted to get, the more you hated me? It was stupid-”

“No,” Chu Wanning said quietly. “It was me. You were right.”

Mo Ran blinked through the tears. He couldn’t remember when they’d started. “You hated me…?”

“No. No. The opposite. That was when… You weren’t the only one to have dreams, Mo Ran.” Chu Wanning swallowed, and looked up to where the corner of the ceiling met the wall. “That was when I… Um. Hm. I mentioned…”

He looked to Mo Ran for *help*, and Mo Ran suddenly remembered: the confession in the garden, when Chu Wanning had said that he’d been in love with Mo Ran since his third year.

Chu Wanning saw him understand, and nodded. “I loathed myself. I thought I was the worst barking beast of a professor in the world. And was terrified of anyone finding out. So I was harsher to you than anyone, pushed you harder… I should have given you the kindness you deserved. But I was a coward. I’d never felt that way for anyone before, and I thought that as long as no one ever knew – especially that as long as *you* never knew – I could pass through it, perhaps. Or, if I couldn’t, at least only I would suffer from it.”

“What else could you have done?” Mo Ran realised out loud. If Chu Wanning had acted in any other way, he would not be Chu Wanning, and Mo Ran loved Chu Wanning. He was

stunned that he felt no resentment at all. Resentment was hurt that had solidified, like ice. When warmed by the flame of love, it became like water again, and flowed away.

"I should have been kinder," Chu Wanning stated again.

"You *were* still kind. You helped me with everything. I didn't realise how much time you were spending helping me on top of all your other work." He managed a wry smile. "You could have been *softer*, but… Shi Mei was soft."

"I never knew how," Chu Wanning whispered. "I've never been… I always wanted to be, be…"

"You are. Just inside. Someone like Shi Mei's a peach. Soft outside, with a hard pit inside."

"An apricot," Chu Wanning mused. "Cyanide within."

"Definitely an apricot." Mo Ran wiped his face again. "I'm dehydrating myself. Do you want hot or cold water?"

It was a pretty blatant trick, to allow Chu Wanning a choice while brooking no argument that he needed to drink something. So Mo Ran came back in a minute later, having gulped down freezing water and carrying a glass of hot for Chu Wanning, along with a handful of pills.

"Antibiotics, painkillers, anti-inflammatories," he said again. "And the green one is in case you want to eat later…"

Chu Wanning had sat up a little in bed. His face was pale, and whitened further at that, but he placed it next to the bowl of congee instead of throwing it, which was definitely an improvement.

“So, yeah. Shi Mei.” Mo Ran sat back on the bed again, and dared to sit just an inch closer than before.

He wished he could touch Chu Wanning. He wished he could hold his hand. For comfort, as well as to comfort, but he didn’t deserve that.

“Do you remember…?” he said slowly. “In Yuliang, you asked me something on our last night. You said that with the Xues I liked spicy food and with you I didn’t, and what did I like when I was on my own? That night I realised that… food and affection were the same thing for me, in a way. If you don’t have food, whatever you’re given is your favourite. You don’t have the luxury of choice or preference.”

Chu Wanning was frowning. “I’m not sure. I was very underweight when I was a child. There were so many things I just refused to eat, either at the Institute or with Huaizui…”

Mo Ran chuckled despite his aching heart. “As always, Shizun is the exception. But for me, any food would do. Any affection. So if Shi Mei was nice to me, I thought I was in love with him.”

“I suppose it gave him a feeling of control,” Chu Wanning said thoughtfully. “He admitted it was deliberate. I couldn’t understand why he’d manipulate you into liking him when he hated you, but perhaps knowing that he *could* made him feel powerful, when all the time he was being manipulated by his brother.”

“I can see it now. Too fucking late. He… It was on the Thursday afternoon, right? Xue Meng showed me the video…”

“For heaven’s sake.” Chu Wanning closed his eyes. “I suppose I should be grateful to Xue Meng, but it’s mortifying that he saw… I still don’t quite know why Shi Mingjing did it. I don’t know if *he* knows.”

“I don’t care,” Mo Ran said, and heard the darkness in his own voice. But he should care. Because he had done the same thing. “I mean… I think trying to work out what he was thinking might be a dead end. Maybe he wasn’t thinking at all.”

Chu Wanning, World Champion Overthinker, didn't look convinced by this, but it was a discussion for another day.

"Before you got into the lab the next morning he told me that you were going to send him away. That it wasn't his project, but that it was bad. Then you came in…" Mo Ran frowned. "You were already furious, you kicked the bin or something. I thought it was the abstract, from the day before…"

"That abstract…" Chu Wanning shook his head. "I'd brought coffee."

Mo Ran looked at him. "But you don't drink coffee."

"It was for you. An apology. Then I walked in, and I saw you holding hands – Shi Mingjing looked as though he was about to cry. As though *he* was about to cry, and you were comforting him. I threw the coffee in the bin. But I'd already decided, Mo Ran. To send him away. It wasn't envy, it was… I genuinely thought that it was the kindest thing to do. I thought that I'd encouraged him somehow, or that he thought a good reference was dependent on… I didn't understand."

The Sexless Savant, Mo Ran thought. The only person in the world who couldn't see how stunning he was. No clue as to his effect on other people. Always trying to find the logic and reason in the actions of the illogical and unreasonable.

"I didn't realise at the time how generous it was. It was an act of mercy. But I thought that… That you were throwing the liability away. That you thought he might fail his viva, and be a blemish on your record. I drove him to Ya'an on the Sunday, and that's when he told me… He told me that you'd come onto him. Kissed him. And implied that if he didn't go along with him, then you'd throw him out of the lab."

"And that's what I had done. Thrown him out of the lab…"

“Exactly. But I didn’t believe it. I couldn’t. It just didn’t make *sense*. And then Shi Mei said that he’d known I wouldn’t believe him, even though I’d promised I would, he’d known no one would believe him, that that was what you’d been counting on. So I made myself.”

Chu Wanning was looking down at the stained duvet cover. “You didn’t believe him at first…?” he asked in a small voice.

“*No.* No. It didn’t even make sense, my brain couldn’t comprehend the words. He told me three times.”

He wanted to stop. His hands were shaking, and now he couldn’t even cry.

“I said that we had to tell people. Had to *get justice* for him. And he said that no one would believe him over you. Then he said that he could only imagine people believing *us* if… If it weren’t just him.”

Mo Ran couldn’t look at Chu Wanning anymore. He stared out of the window instead, at the white expanse of the mountain opposite.

“I asked him if he’d report you, if I could find someone. He said yes. And I thought that if I couldn’t find someone… I could become someone.”

Chapter 75: Heart and Slave

“That night I nearly drove off the road, I was so angry. My hands were shaking on the wheel. I had to pull over and just scream. Because it was *you*. I’d thought, you know, there was one person in the whole world who really was *good*, who really gave a shit about people, and it was all fake. And that disillusionment… I thought that even if you did hate me, I’d never thought that you’d do something like that.”

He hadn’t, Chu Wanning wanted to say. He didn’t.

They had failed each other so terribly, and what made it such a tragedy was that it was their trust that had led to their failing and being failed.

Mo Ran, terrified of abandonment and loneliness, had trusted as a dog trusted: waiting for a return.

Chu Wanning, terrified of sudden betrayal or unexpected violence, had trusted as a cat trusted: turning his back and looking away.

“I know it’s no excuse, but I was so angry, so hurt – that’s the thing, I didn’t even realise I was hurt too. That you’d assaulted Shi Mei, but also that you’d picked Shi Mei instead of me! You hadn’t even destroyed the illusion with *me*. You’d picked Shi Mei. Which sounds so stupid, but I do think that’s what I was thinking without even knowing it. It wasn’t all righteous. It was hurt and betrayed and rejected as well And that… I don’t know how to explain it. It turned the heat cold and the cold hot.”

But he hadn’t done it, Chu Wanning said in his mind. His throat had closed fast on the words.

He knew that he should be taking this in. That he should be reassuring Mo Ran that he understood. But the problem was that he *did* understand, and he understood too well.

Mo Ran had thought, for months, that he was like Hua Binan.

The depths of disgust he must have felt for so many weeks, the show he'd put on in tolerating Chu Wanning's presence… Chu Wanning couldn't have done it. He couldn't have pretended to be Hua Binan or Shi Mei's friend. Was Mo Ran that good an actor? Or was it Chu Wanning, too stupid to realise, too autistic to read the reality?

For Mo Ran, and Mo Ran alone, denial was on the tip of his tongue. He wanted to defend himself from the accusation, even if he intellectually knew and understood that Mo Ran knew now that it was a lie.

He felt sick, that Mo Ran had loathed him so much, had been working to destroy his life, and Chu Wanning had been oblivious. His stomach clenched around nothing.

"Word to the wise, Dr. Chu. Throw up if you must, but the bag's not getting removed, so I'd advise against it. You do you, though."

"I remembered I'd smashed your mug, on the Thursday, so I bought another one on the way to the lab. I should have realised that subconsciously I knew how stupid I was being, because if I'd been really smart I'd have bought you something really classy – elegant – with calligraphy on or something. But instead I bought you the gaudiest, girliest one they had, all gold and fussy, because I knew you'd have to accept it to be polite. I don't understand myself. Why would I know that you'd be polite like that, but also think you were a sexual predator?"

Sexual predator. Sexual predator. Sexual predator. The words resounded in his head with a growing horror, while his heart whined almost audibly that Mo Ran really had bought him a mug that he'd known Chu Wanning would hate. He'd suspected it, and he'd chastised himself for his suspicion. But his paranoia, his doubt – they were what had been right all along. The worst and most poisonous parts of himself were the ones most wholly in the real world.

"It was hard work, at first. I realised that you didn't like talking about people, or films or the television, or which bar was cool or which restaurant was good. When I'd been hanging out with Song Quitong and her friends – even Xue Meng and- and Shi Mei – I thought that's what everyone talked about. That that's what *normal* people talked about, and if I wanted to be normal, that's what I had to be interested in as well. So I became the most normal person

ever. Didn't care about anything, just gossiped to pass the time, easy to go wherever everyone else wanted."

It was silly, in the face of everything else, to be pricked by the needle of his abnormality. Because that's what Mo Ran was saying. Chu Wanning knew his formal logic. Modus Camestres, AEE-2.

All normal people enjoy gossip and television and bars.

Chu Wanning does not enjoy gossip and television and bars.

∴ Chu Wanning is not a normal person.

He knew it, obviously. He had known it since he was old enough to know anything: the first, ultimate, core truth of himself. But for Mo Ran to say it scored a fresh line across his soul.

His eyes flickered up, to see whether Mo Ran knew this, and was surprised to see Mo Ran staring right at him. But he was wearing a small smile, and his eyes were shining.

"You were so particular. So picky. It was amazing."

Chu Wanning frowned. "That doesn't even make any sense."

"It does! I mean… You knew exactly what you liked and disliked and why."

"Well, yes?" Chu Wanning didn't know what else was expected of him, but then he realised. He had always been too *much*: too sensitive, too fussy, too obsessive, too fixated.

"I remember asking you about music. I was so angry at you," Mo Ran was saying.

“Angry? For music?” Chu Wanning had given up trying to work out what he could possibly have said about *music* to annoy Mo Ran. It could have been anything. It could simply have been his manner.

“Sort of. I told you, about my mum. She’d gone from being a conservatory student to busking on the street. And while she was doing that, you were giving solo performances in Beijing.”

The NCPA concert, Chu Wanning realised. The summer he was eleven, his first Long Vacation from Oxford. The university didn’t permit work during term-time, but with only three sets of eight weeks, that gave them half the year in which to pursue Huaizui’s other projects, the tours and concerts and competitions. The NCPA was shaped like an enormous *weiqi* piece made of glass, and the opera house had been all scarlet and gold, with room for over two thousand people. Huaizui had shaved his head specially for the concert, saying that he had to look neat, because it was going to be filmed for CCTV.

He’d played a wrong note, during the final minute of *Wild Geese Landing on the Sandbank*. He didn’t remember much of the rest of the concert, of the applause and the photographs afterwards – only that incorrect note, playing over and over in his head, the sweat of his hands that came from the certainty that Huaizui had heard it, the correct prediction of his cold fury.

Huaizui had not hit him or anything like that. He hadn’t needed to.

“I thought that by now you would understand that every mistake you make reflects on me*. Do you know how many million people witnessed your carelessness? Your thoughtlessness? This is how you repay me, for everything I have done for you – by humiliating me in front of millions of people? Every day I understand your mother more and more; I can’t bear to look at you.”*

He had been worrying about an incorrect note, when Mo Ran’s mother had been worrying about how to feed her child. Huaizui had been right, but not for the reason he’d thought – Chu Wanning *was* thoughtless, but his thoughtlessness was not in his qin-playing, but in his self-pity when Mo Ran and his mother had been enduring the beating sun and summer crowds, walking past without a glance at the young mother and her tiny son.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I know the concert. I understand.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” Mo Ran said. “That’s what I mean… I was so in my own head, so fixated on making you into the villain Shi Mei was painting you to be, that I couldn’t read you. You were scared, and I interpreted it as arrogance. I should have felt sorry for you, not blamed you.”

“There’s no need to feel sorry for me,” Chu Wanning snapped. “Don’t be so ridiculous. It was a concert. I’ve done scores of them.”

“You were scared,” Mo Ran said, softly, firmly. “Any child would be. I was so busy comparing you and my mum, but I didn’t see the actual core of it. That you were both having to perform for scraps. It should have made me understand you, not hate you.”

“It’s a ludicrous comparison. It’s not the same at all. What she suffered-”

“I know. But it’s not a competition. You suffered too. We all did, all three of us, and I let people turn me against you, instead of being on your side. Do you see? It should have brought us together, and I let it push us apart.”

“You thought I was a sexual predator, Mo Ran,” he said, and the words brought acid to the back of his throat. “I can’t imagine you were in the mindset to develop solidarity.”

“No. No. I wasn’t. But I also wasn’t… I kept having to remind myself. Of what Shi Mei had told me. Because it was all part of this horrible, shitty plan, but I was also… I enjoyed it. Not the plan – fuck, I thought I had a stomach ulcer or cancer or something, I couldn’t sleep, could barely eat. But the spending time with you. That’s the thing, though… Every class I did with you, I had to work harder than with everything else I was doing put together. But the harder I worked the more obsessed I got. And lunch and coffee with you were like that. I started paying attention to the world, so that I’d have something worthy to say to you at lunchtime, something that might pique your interest. And the more you pay attention, the more you see. The more you notice. The brighter the colours get.”

Mo Ran visibly swallowed, and his gaze drifted to the mountains again. “You got sick in January. I brought you food… I went to Ya’an that weekend, to visit Shi Mei. I was angry at myself, for taking so long. I think deep down I knew what a fucked-up idea it was – that it

would fail, apart from anything else. I had all these different thoughts in my head – I was loyal to Shi Mei, so I had to believe him, which meant believing the worst about you, but that was getting harder, and the harder it got the more sick I felt, then I felt more guilty for doubting Shi Mei… I just wanted it to end. I just needed to put an end to it."

Chu Wanning shook his head. "In Ya'an… That's where you bought it. The drug."

"Yeah. A guy came up to me, outside the toilets. I thought he was selling poppers…"

"I don't know what- What are poppers?"

"They're legal! Akyl nitrate. Muscle relaxants – what do they call them – vasodilators. For… you know. You sniff them, and they make you feel a bit euphoric, but it's mainly for the, um, the zero. Down there."

Chu Wanning looked away, feeling furious. He'd never heard of such a thing, and his ignorance felt like… He had been about to think *like a gaping void*, but he quickly snuffed out that thought, ears burning.

"Well. It's a good thing that you bought some other drug instead of *poppers*, then."

Mo Ran looked confused and ashamed. "Why?"

"Well, if these *poppers* are vasodilators, I could have died," Chu Wanning said, unable to smother entirely the spite in his voice. "Vasodilators lower blood pressure, so they can cause reflex tachycardia. Severe ventricular tachycardia can trigger a heart attack. Though I imagine it would have been more difficult to induce me to smell something than drink something. Or maybe not. You delivered that perfume that that student's father made – Luo Xianxian. The haitang sample. So. I should be grateful, I suppose, to Hua Binan. How much do poppers usually go for? I know you haggled him down."

He looked up at Mo Ran, and saw his trembling chin, the tears in his eyes. Rage and fear warred with guilt; he had forgiven Mo Ran, and he had said that he would listen, but his feelings of humiliation and self-loathing made him want to hiss and claw.

He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You’re right.”

“Still. Still, it- It doesn’t help things now, does it?”

It was probably psychosomatic, but his heart was racing. Imagine if he *had* had a heart attack. If he had died, that would be all he would ever be known for – Chu Wanning, who died after taking *gay drugs* with a student in a bar.

“How much do they normally cost?” he asked, as though knowing would help. To see if Mo Ran honestly believed they were legal, he supposed, but it didn’t matter really; there was a schism in his head, with a widening abyss between what he wanted to know and what he *should* know.

An abyss in his chest as well, caused by Huaizui’s kitchen knife. Chu Wanning’s head was beginning to spin. His broken heart stuttered against the ribcage that seemed to be contracted; the bones were growing larger, heavier, radioactive, crushing and twisting the intercostal muscles. His heart was panicking, his breath was faltering, and he was dying.

He was going to die, he suddenly realised. Right now, in this bed. It might not be at a bar, with a student, drugs in his system, but a coroner would be able to see far, far worse than that written in his body.

“…ning? Wanning?”

Throat tight, chest tighter, Chu Wanning blinked and tried to focus on Mo Ran’s face. He’d said that he’d listen, and now look at him. Another broken promise.

He needed to know. He needed to hear it all. But his heart was having other ideas.

Control yourself, Chu Wanning! Can't you even do this for him? Pathetic. No wonder he so easily thought the worst of you.

But he was dying, he tried to reason with himself. Why now? Why now, where Mo Ran had to witness it? It was so unfair! He was going to die, and there was nothing he could do to stop it, his heart was going to give out as it had so treacherously failed to do while Hua Binan was fucking his useless body-

"Wanning, what can I do? I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have-"

Chu Wanning shook his head. He positioned his hand over his heart and fluttered his fingers.

"Okay, okay – hang on, just hang on, I know where the pills are!"

Of course he knew. He'd found them that night they were mugged, hadn't he? In this same flat, when Chu Wanning had told him that the closest thing he'd ever had to a father had hated him so much that he'd tried to wipe him from the face of the earth.

Mo Ran should flee. Run away from Chu Wanning and his disgusting needs and his pernicious influence.

Instead, he came back with the bottle and a glass. Mo Ran helped him swallow the propranolol, and he sank back into the pillows. They smelt of sweat. Everything he touched became filthy.

He realised with a jolt behind his stomach that despite the topic that had caused his panic, it had not occurred to him in the slightest that Mo Ran had done anything to the water or to the pills. He had taken both with the trusting docility of a lamb.

No. This was not a fault of his, but a quality of Mo Ran's. Chu Wanning truly and honestly believed in his remorse and his repentance – that he would never do such a thing again. In the light of true rehabilitation, punishment was unnecessary and cruel. Probably the worst of Chu Wanning's many, many flaws was a tendency to lash out, but Mo Ran did not deserve it.

After all, at the end of the day, where did the greatest fault lie? Mo Ran, Shi Mingjing, Hua Binan. It was Chu Wanning who was the common denominator, and the denominator sat below the line – it was the denominator that was the root cause.

"Do you want me to go into the other room?" Mo Ran asked softly.

"No," Chu Wanning said. All the spite was gone from his soul; it had leaked out of the holes in his heart. "Please stay. Please stay with me."

The bed creaked as Mo Ran lay down with him. Nangong Xu and Nangong Liu had died like this, Chu Wanning thought – face to face. Just like this.

Probably weeping, just like this.

"I shouldn't have asked you to listen," Mo Ran said. He folded Chu Wanning's hand between his own, apparently without even realising he was doing it, and Chu Wanning didn't know whether it was that touch or the propranolol that was easing his heart.

"No. I need to. And I think you need to say it." Mo Ran needed to know that Chu Wanning could forgive him with open eyes. That didn't make it easier to hear it all. To face his own gullibility and his sick, foolish hunger for affection. "I'm just so tired…"

"Then sleep," Mo Ran said. "Let your heart settle. I'll be here."

Chapter 76: Painful Paedagogy

Chapter Notes

> Lord, I'm so sorry that this chapter took so long - life has been exceptionally cruel recently. I'm hoping that the future will be kinder, especially for Americans this week - good luck, friends!

For the first two hours of the dose, Chu Wanning slept like the dead. But as the sun began to creep around the west-facing windows and the snow blared blue-white on the mountains, he started to stir: frowning, muttering, gasping. At one point he suddenly tried to move away on the bed; Mo Ran had to pull him back to stop him from falling off and dashing his brains out on the corner of the bedside table.

“Mo Ran…?” he murmured.

“Yes. It’s me.”

“Mn.” Chu Wanning moved closer, breathing out in relief.

Mo Ran didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know whether his next move would bring Chu Wanning a sense of security or a panic attack. If it were one or the other he could react properly, but…

He *could* react properly, he thought. But he wouldn’t. If what Chu Wanning really needed was for Mo Ran to leave and never see him again, did Mo Ran really think he would have the strength to do it? Honestly?

It was all too much to be looking at the darkness of his past without exploring the darkness of his presence as well.

No. Ethical quandaries would help no one right now. The important thing was that Chu Wanning ate something, and it didn't matter how cruel Mo Ran had to be to accomplish it.

By the time the sun was fully visible over the mountains to the west, the light stretching roseate, Mo Ran had reheated the congee, and added the soy and honey that he suspected might tempt Chu Wanning, stains be damned.

As he cooked, he heard the toilet flushing. When he carried the bowl back into the bedroom, he saw Chu Wanning looking at him suspiciously, buried up to his nose in the duvet.

"You have to eat," Mo Ran said, trying reason before anything else. "Or the antibiotics and the painkillers will make you feel more sick."

"I will tomorrow," Chu Wanning said, looking away.

Mo Ran felt a warm pain at the sight of his terrible lying. "No. Now. Please."

"I said tomorrow."

Mo Ran inwardly sighed, and unsheathed the blade. "Take the pill with it. I know you're afraid of the pain, but you have to eat…"

Chu Wanning's eyes widened at his daring, and then narrowed. "I'm not afraid."

"Then eat."

"I'm not hungry."

“Yes, you are. And you’re only going to get hungrier. I’ve seen you endure pain I’d pass out at in a second, this really won’t be that bad.”

“How would you know?” Chu Wanning hissed.

“Eh… I’ve slept with guys far less stoic than you,” Mo Ran said. “It happens even when it isn’t… rough.”

“Mo Ran!”

“I’ll stop talking about it if you eat.” Mo Ran held out the bowl and closed his eyes.

The congee in the face and the bowl to the head didn’t come. He opened one eye.

Chu Wanning had sat up a little and was holding the bowl. “… what if I’m sick?”

Mo Ran perked up. “There’s a bucket next to the bed.”

“Aren’t I meant to take a pill first?”

“It’s on the bedside table, with some water.”

Chu Wanning had the aura of a hunted animal. “It’s not just pain,” he whispered harshly.

“It is. I promise, it is. Because there’s no shame in it.”

Chu Wanning looked at him blankly. His phoenix eyes were rimmed with red, shaded with purple. He didn't dignify the reassurance with an answer.

But he did swallow the pill, his movements mechanical, and gingerly took the bowl. He grimaced, stirred the congee, and lifted the spoon.

Mo Ran could *see* the moment the hunger hit him; Chu Wanning had eaten three mouthfuls before he could reach the bed and still his hand.

"What now?"

"Slowly!" Mo Ran said. He couldn't help but smile. "Slowly."

"You wanted me to eat, now you don't want me to eat-"

"I want you to eat and keep it down. If you eat too quickly on such an empty stomach you'll just throw it back up, then you'll be starving *and* more dehydrated."

Chu Wanning glared at him, but saw the sense behind it. He ate another mouthful, more consciously than before. "…are you not eating?"

"I'll get a bowl." He'd made the meal to Chu Wanning's tastes, not his own, but he could live with the dried prawns. It was worth it, to sit cross-legged on the bed and eat quietly with Chu Wanning.

The prawns weren't even that bad. It could have been the bland meal they'd reluctantly given him on the second day in the cell.

Even worse, it could have been savoury tofu pudding.

The thought brought back a painful memory: he and Shi Mei and Xue Meng, all three of them agreeing with Sichuan passion that savoury tofu pudding was disgusting. Mo Ran had joked that Chu Wanning's preference for it was a sign of a rotten soul; Xue Meng had kicked him under the table.

Shi Mei had smiled and said "A-Ran…"

Chu Wanning swallowed a mouthful of rice. "That night those two men mugged us," he began, "on the way back from the Xues. Did you… do anything that night?"

He must have been thinking about how sleepy the propranolol had made him earlier. "No," Mo Ran said, and knew that only perfect honesty could possibly rebuild any trust. "But I thought about it. I thought that it'd be the perfect time to take some incriminating photos, but the fuckers had stolen our phones, hadn't they?"

"You could have asked the taxi to bring you back to the Xues," Chu Wanning said in a thoughtful monotone. "You didn't know that Xue Meng had seen… If you'd just told them, that would have been enough."

Mo Ran scoffed. "Never. Never in a million years. They'd believe you over me in a second, Wanning. That's why I thought I'd have to take photos or something. But I actually felt relieved that our phones were gone. So I didn't have to. I… I did search your flat. Dunno what I thought I might find. Obviously nothing."

Chu Wanning looked away sharply. Mo Ran wished that he could take it back, the action or the words – already his little flat felt invaded and unsafe, and now he knew that its violation had actually occurred so much earlier. He wished he could say something to comfort him.

"Why did you decide on New Year's, then? We hadn't planned anything. It was your idea to go out."

"Yeah," Mo Ran said. "It's… It was so stupid. If I'd been actually thinking about, you know, cameras or alibis or *anything*, I'd have done it so differently. But I wasn't thinking any more. I was so desperate. I just wanted it to be over."

“I feel so…” Chu Wanning said quietly. “I remember you had a dissertation chapter.”

“Yeah. Because you wouldn’t go out if it was purely social. I *know*. Hearing myself say it… But I thought you were being so careful because you had something to hide. I didn’t know about your supervisor or anything, obviously.”

“I could see how it would look very rigid. Very… cautious.”

“Yeah. Exactly.” Mo Ran’s guts felt like they were alive, squirming and twisting inside him. “I lied to you about New Year. I said that they made comments, my uncle’s cousin and her husband. They didn’t. They were all really nice. But then I accidentally told you the truth. Do you remember? I said that it was nice to be able to talk to someone about it without them saying I should be grateful for being clothed and fed, that it came with strings attached. The Xues have never done that. But I was thinking about Mo Guiying. I felt more pissed off at myself for telling you the truth than for lying. I don’t know why. Like… Like *that* was what was wrong. Using that time in the cellar to… To do what Mo Nian did. I didn’t think that, I didn’t *know* that’s what it was, but I felt so sick at myself for telling you the truth then. You told me about your shithead father – guardian – and then I knew deep down, I realised we were the same, I *knew* it, and instead of- Instead of. I used that link to lure you out. Like a fucking psychopath. I feel like that was worse than the drug. That that was the worst thing.”

“That’s what Wang Chuqing didn’t understand,” Chu Wanning said. “It was… The drug. That was bad. But… What hurts the most is not knowing what’s real and what isn’t.”

Mo Ran felt a tear run under his jaw. “Yeah. I get that.”

“But I don’t understand. If you thought that I wouldn’t do anything inappropriate with you in my right mind, then why did you still believe Shi Mingjing? Did you think that I could really prefer him over *you*?”

“Well, yeah. Obviously. I know I look good too, but he was always the polite one, the chill one, the one who never gave you any trouble.”

“All qualities that are known to inspire passion,” Chu Wanning said, with a ghost of his old wryness. “Or… Or did you think that he was more submissive, and so I had targeted him as the more likely victim to be intimidated?”

It made Mo Ran *sick*, to hear Chu Wanning forced to analyse himself as though he were the predator in this situation. “It could have been that. But to be honest, I was thinking less and less. I don’t want to pretend this was all some righteous intellectual plan. I *wanted you*. What Shi Mei told me was an excuse, not a reason, Wanning. *I* was the shithead here. *I* was the predator. *I* was the fucking rapist.”

“You were not,” Chu Wanning said sharply, eyes flashing with anger like lightning.

“If not a rapist then the next-worst thing. I don’t know if I’d have stopped if you hadn’t had that seizure.”

“But you did stop.”

“You could have died.”

“And you stayed up all night making sure that I didn’t.”

Mo Ran groaned with frustration. “I was afraid of being caught!”

Chu Wanning wore a thoughtful frown. “No. I mean, I am sure you were, but… Do you remember in Rufeng, when those two men were shot? You covered my ears, and turned me around so that I couldn’t see. When Nangong Xu asked who you were, you said that I had saved your life and so you owed me a debt. And he said that that didn’t explain why you had covered my ears. Taking me to your flat and making sure I didn’t choke, I could understand those actions as arising from the motive of escaping punishment. But you also held my hair back when I vomited. You cleaned my face.”

“Yeah, because originally I thought we’d have mutually assured destruction. Instead it was all on me. I had to keep you on my side, I had to deceive you.”

“Is that why you told me to shut up for once in my life?” Chu Wanning asked.

Mo Ran gaped at him. “That was- I was frustrated, you kept saying how kind I was being and I felt so guilty-”

“That you stayed up all night, and held my hair, and cleaned my face.” Chu Wanning was staring at him very seriously. “I’m saying that you were conflicted. You felt guilt. You felt remorse. Hua Binan hasn’t.”

“I can’t think, ‘Oh, I was less of a torturing, murdering, kidnapping rapist than Hua Binan, I can go easy on myself.’ It doesn’t matter what I did in comparison to what Hua Binan did. What matters is what I was compared to what I should have been.”

Chu Wanning had flinched at that word *rapist* and was now staring at the wall again. After a long moment he spoke again, in a very quiet voice.

“I’m not dismissing what you did. But that also means recognising what you didn’t do. If a single mistake – even if mistake piled upon mistake – makes a person irredeemable, what motivation do they have to change?”

“They should want to change anyway. Whether they’re forgiven or not,” Mo Ran said stubbornly.

Chu Wanning sighed. “Yes. But that is not within *my* power. That’s not something that I can do for them, and I will not be passive in this. I refuse.” His eyes returned to Mo Ran’s. “After… that night. It was a new term. Did you still intend to ruin me?”

It was Mo Ran’s turn to drop his gaze – that word *ruin* felt like a barb. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I’d realised how awful and stupid a plan it was. I thought that even if you had

done what Shi Mei had said – and, thinking back, I was thinking in terms of 'if' then, and I felt so guilty for that too, for doubting him – then I was as bad as you now. Worse. I drank the rest of the weekend; threw up more than you did. I thought that I'd give up and try to go back to how things had been before, but when you came into the lab that morning I realised I couldn't. I knew about your hatemail and your father and how interested in things you were and how interesting *you* were. We'd been becoming friends, and now I had to go back to having nothing of you, and I was just so sick of it all. I couldn't concentrate. I just kept thinking about you, and about what I'd done, and… and I wasn't paying attention to the parcels."

Chu Wanning nodded; Mo Ran sensed from him a strange relief that they had come to the bombing. "I was embarrassed, mostly. I felt guilty too. I thought that I had scared you, that it had been inappropriate to accept your invitation, and then for you to have seen me… being sick. And to have… when I couldn't talk. Those periods are very... They're humiliating. Shaming. To not be able to speak. But you were actually… I remember thinking that you didn't seem to think I should be ashamed of it. You understood, and you made it easier to communicate without expecting me to use my voice."

"I'd caused it."

"Still. Others who have caused them in the past have been far less understanding," Chu Wanning said wryly, and Mo Ran knew that he was thinking about Huaizui. "Still, when I was back in the lab, it felt easier to feel some distance and dignity again. I know people probably think I'm being arrogant and stand-offish, but it's… The only way I can bear myself."

The only way he could bear himself – how lonely an existence, Mo Ran thought. To only be safe in solitude, and to hate yourself there.

He'd had one morning of dignity, before Mo Ran had ripped the tab of the bomb and his health away from him in a single careless movement.

"I still have no idea how you carried me out," he said. "I've got, what, sixty pounds on you?" It was more, now, but he retained enough tact not to say so.

“Adrenaline,” Chu Wanning said. “I didn’t feel a lot of it until we were outside. I was just thinking about the compressed gases for the pneumatics practicals. But you weren’t moving, and your head was covered in blood. That’s when I felt it all. Xue Meng was there…”

“Xue Meng. Shit.” Mo Ran sighed. “He was… I’ve never seen him so angry as when I woke up. No one would tell me where you were, they were implying you were in the waiting room or something. And I was such an evil little shit to him. I remember- I said that he was only angry at me because he felt guilty for being in the robotics lab instead of with us. He stormed out, I think he was crying, and I was so… But then Shi Mei came in, and he’s the one who told me it was a nail bomb. I thought it was just because he was studying there in Ya’an, that he’d been able to come and visit, but Hua Binan had been in as well, acting the doctor. So they were both… But then Xue Meng came in, and broke the fucker’s nose.”

Chu Wanning blinked in surprise. “He what?”

Mo Ran allowed himself a smile. “He punched Shi Mei right in the face, and broke his fucking nose. There was blood everywhere. And when I saw him yesterday, it was crooked.”

Chu Wanning was staring into space. “I didn’t notice… I’m not very good with faces sometimes.”

“Well, I can’t take any credit. I can’t believe I was pissed off at him. But next time you see him, you should tell him well done.”

Chu Wanning’s shoulders curled in. He opened his mouth to speak, and then apparently thought better of it.

“What is it?” Mo Ran asked.

“Nothing. Nothing… But that’s when he showed you the video?”

“Yeah. Right after he chased Shi Mei off.” Mo Ran swallowed, and it felt like swallowing an open butterfly knife. “So I knew, by the time you woke up. Everything after that was honest. It was real. I promise, Wanning. That’s all of it.”

“It isn’t.” Chu Wanning looked at him, and Mo Ran felt would have been less painful if his eyes were cold or angry. Instead they were blank with pain. “If it was all honest, Mo Ran, then… On the day I turned thirty, you asked me for forgive you for a mistake. You weren’t talking about the bomb, were you?”

Mo Ran’s breath shuddered out of him. He shook his head.

“I don’t understand,” Chu Wanning said. “I said that I’d forgive you, for anything you’d done. I *said* it. Why didn’t you tell me then?”

“Because… Because I thought that if you knew what I’d *really* done…”

“Then I’d take it back? That I’d be a liar? You didn’t believe me.” Chu Wanning closed his eyes. “I know that I have some culpability, if you didn’t feel that you could trust me. But that… That is what…”

“After I told you that I liked you,” Mo Ran said, “I was going to tell you then. I swore that the next time I saw you, I’d tell you. But… I was a coward. If I didn’t see you, then I didn’t have to tell you. But then you came to my flat, with that scroll…”

“And you *didn’t* tell me again,” Chu Wanning replied. “Do you- You left it for *Hua Binan* to tell me. He told me over and over again, laughing at me. I had to hear it from him, while he did the most disgusting…” Chu Wanning’s eyes were dry, but he made a sound like a choked-off sob in the back of his throat. “He was laughing at me.”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I just wish you’d been the one to tell me.”

“I’m so sorry,” Mo Ran said. He wished he could beg Chu Wanning on his knees. Or simply touch him. “I’m so sorry.”

Chu Wanning inhaled, visibly steeling himself. “Is there anything else?”

“No.” Mo Ran shook his head. “I- I don’t think so.”

“If there is, if you remember anything, will you tell me?”

“Yes. Of course.” Mo Ran felt as though he was suffocating under his own repressed pleas; he had wanted to allow Chu Wanning his space, but he couldn’t bear his dirtiness any longer. “I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness-”

“’*Deserve*’.” Chu Wanning dismissed the word with an exhausted flick of his fingers. “I think I’ve said it before. What you didn’t deserve is how people have treated you and used you. I’ve already forgiven you, but I’ll say it again, knowing everything. I forgive you, and I hope that you can forgive me as well.”

“There’s nothing to forgive!” He’d thought that hearing the words would ease something, but instead the knots around his heart tightened. “How can you? How could you possibly forgive all this?”

“Do you not trust me? Believe me?” Chu Wanning said quietly.

“I do – I want to! But I hurt you so much; I don’t know how you can just push those feelings away.”

“I’m not. I don’t think forgiveness is a feeling, Mo Ran. It’s an action. It’s a decision. That’s what makes it different to forgetting. And as it is a decision it’s mine to make.”

Mo Ran shook the tears free from his eyes, and his breath hitched as Chu Wanning suddenly reached out and took his hand.

“You shouldn’t forgive me. I don’t deserve it. I can’t forgive myself!”

“I wish you would. I’ll help you to. Mo Ran… You were my student for how many years, and you still don’t know my rules?”

Mo Ran blinked at him. “Don’t open parcels addressed to you?”

Chu Wanning managed a smile at that. “Not that one. No. Remember. I wrote it down in every syllabus... *Every student can resit an exam as many times as they need to*.”

Chapter 77: Carrying Guilt

Mo Ran offered to sleep on the sofa that night, but Chu Wanning refused, citing the cold. So they slept like they had in Yuliang, Chu Wanning curled tightly in on himself, and Mo Ran staring at the ceiling in an agonised confusion of love and guilt.

The next day Mo Ran dug out some fresh bedclothes, unable to bear the stains of blood and snowmelt anymore. He suggested that Chu Wanning sit with a blanket on the sofa for a while, but he refused; instead he stood in the corner of the bedroom, watching Mo Ran make the bed with wide shadowed eyes, gripping his arms.

Afterwards, Chu Wanning crawled into the fresh bed, lay on his side, and stared at the wall. Mo Ran took a comb to his long hair, remembering his internal promise to treasure it, in the hope that Chu Wanning wouldn't go through with his feverish demand to cut it off.

He was as careful as he could be, but after a few minutes the comb inevitably snagged on a knot.

"Ah, sorry, sorry."

Chu Wanning blinked and turned over, looking up at him with a small frown, and Mo Ran realised with dawning horror that Chu Wanning hadn't been silently relaxing, or even ignoring him. He'd been somewhere else, completely unaware that someone was touching his hair.

It made him feel physically sick.

To avoid thinking about what that meant, he focused on Chu Wanning; he smiled down at him, and brought the lock of hair over his shoulder and smoothed it flat, mindful to only let gentle admiration show on his face.

Chu Wanning reached up and slapped him.

It was a weak, jerking motion, and it shocked rather than hurt. It shocked Chu Wanning too; he gasped and blinked again, and then was pushing himself up. "*Mo Ran.* No, no, no, I'm sorry, I'm so –"

He reached out his hand to touch Mo Ran's cheek, his fingertips trembling. Mo Ran let them explore for a second, then gently captured the hand and placed a kiss to its palm.

"I deserve far more than that."

"No," Chu Wanning said again. "No."

"Was it him?"

Chu Wanning nodded. "He placed my hair like that. Before he… Every time."

He needed to know these things, he needed to know what to avoid, but Chu Wanning had barely said ten words about what Hua Binan had done to him. "Because he… likes your hair?" Mo Ran said softly, so carefully.

Chu Wanning's face twisted, in a grotesque twin of a smile. "Because he hated seeing my scar. But I have scars on my back as well, and the one on my chest is smaller. Easier to hide."

Mo Ran wanted to storm out of the room and find someone – preferably Hua Binan – to murder. Instead, he kissed his own fingers, and reached inside Chu Wanning's pyjama shirt until he felt the hitch of scar tissue.

Chu Wanning's skin felt as cold as stone, but the look on his face gentled Mo Ran's rage, allowed him the calmness to bank it for later.

However, touching the plane of flesh above Chu Wanning's heart, Mo Ran felt the leap of terror when the buzzer sounded.

He insisted on following Mo Ran to the door. He held up a hand to shield his view from something, and watched like a hawk as Mo Ran pressed the intercom. He continued to watch as a delivery man made three trips up and down the stairs, lugging up two oil radiators and then a final parcel of warm clothing that Mo Ran had ordered.

As Mo Ran signed to confirm the delivery, a voice sounded in relief and delight. "Xiao Chu!"

Chu Wanning fled; he slammed the bedroom door in his haste, and then Mo Ran heard the bathroom door and a frantic click as Chu Wanning locked it behind him.

The delivery man passed Zhang Xinyi on the stairs. Mo Ran smiled down at her in apologetic exhaustion. "Ah… It's not you, Auntie," he said softly. "He…"

To his horror his eyes filled with tears, and he hushed Auntie Zhang's instantaneous flurry of comfort and questions. "Quietly, quietly. He, um. It wasn't the police. It was…" A kinder half-lie occurred to him. "It was some criminals, they were involved in all that stuff in Linyi. They wanted to teach him a lesson."

Zhang Xinyi gasped. "Have you gone to the police?"

"No. One of them is in the police. I'll write down their names and descriptions, try to find some photos, but you have to be careful letting anyone into the building, okay?"

"Of course, of course. Corrupt police, I should have known, they're always harassing him. What can I do? Do you need me to go and buy food?"

"You mean it? That would actually really… We're about to run out of food. I don't want to leave him alone, we'll both worry."

“I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t mean it,” she said, affronted. “Have you ever known me to be polite?”

Mo Ran chuckled damply. “You’ve got me there.”

“Exactly. I’d need an abacus to count the number of times Xiao Chu’s fixed my fuses or mended my things or run errands when I’ve been sick or away. I’ll put these inside the door and go straight out again. What kind of food?”

Was he doomed to always find out about Chu Wanning’s kindnesses so uselessly late? “No spice. The blandest, most *qingdan* food possible, but with some meats. They didn’t feed him much, and he’s having trouble eating, so I want to make tempting foods, comforting foods, you know? And if you could get some sweets, some cakes – he loves those.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Snow fungus soup. Do you know how to make that? I’ll buy the ingredients for that too and write you a recipe. Oh, no wait! It’s the solstice today! Tangyuan, it has to be tangyuan. And dumplings. Don’t you worry, *xiaohuozi*, I’ll get everything. You leave it to me, just look after Xiao Chu.”

Xiao Chu was still locked in the bathroom. Mo Ran secured the front door, and went through to knock. “It’s all right, Wanning. It was only Zhang Xinyi.”

“I know.”

The voice was lower - lower in terms of position, rather than pitch - than Mo Ran had anticipated. Chu Wanning must be sitting on the floor against the bathtub. Mo Ran sat down outside the door.

“She’s gone out to get some food for you. Some tangyuan for the solstice…”

“She shouldn’t. She should hate me.”

“Why should she hate you?” Mo Ran asked. He kept his voice as neutral as he could.

There was a long silence. *“She was in danger.”*

“Ah, she’s brave. She was furious when I came back, not scared.”

“She didn’t know. Hua Binan had… He’d brought tea. A yellow mark pu’erh. He said he’d come into some money and he needed to talk to me about something, so the tea was to… I made it in the gongfu set. So stupid. But I was still… I made sure he drank it too. I wasn’t going to… He drank it too, Mo Ran.”

“It was drugged?”

“Mn. But he’d eaten activated charcoal before coming up, which soaked it up… It was the paralytic. The same Nangong Xu used on his brother. For ten minutes I was on the sofa, so that Zhang Xinyi could settle in and see those police outfits, and Hua Binan washed up the tea set, he called down to…”

Chu Wanning had been shielding his gaze from the sofa, Mo Ran realised with a horrible jolt. Remembering those helpless ten minutes.

“*I couldn’t move. I couldn’t… They put a bag over my head, and I… But they said that if I made a noise, if I called for help, they’d kill Zhang Xinyi.”*

He’d known it. He’d known… “That’s not your fault. That’s on Hua Binan. You didn’t put her in danger; you saved her life, and she doesn’t even know it.”

“She wouldn’t have been in danger if not for me.”

Mo Ran wiped the tears from his face, and tried not to let them show in his voice. “Wanning, even if you were a hermit, Hua Binan would have found *someone* to threaten. Because that’s the kind of person he is. He could pick any stranger off the street and know it’d work, because that’s the kind of person *you* are. And Zhang Xinyi doesn’t even know what you endured to save her life, and she’s still gone out to find tangyuan ingredients, because you’ve always been so kind to her.”

There was a whimper from the bathroom, quickly stifled. Mo Ran wished that he could break in the door and hug Chu Wanning through whatever he was thinking.

“She shouldn’t. She shouldn’t.”

“She should. And she has. You’ve done nothing wrong. I wish I could… Why don’t you run a nice hot bath, yeah? I’ll set up the radiators and cook us something. The radiators will have it warm as anything by the time you’re out.”

The oil radiators performed admirably, but Chu Wanning still went back into bed after his bath, and resumed the important task of blankly staring at the wall. He managed the three tangyuan with an apparent expression of enjoyment, but only one dumpling, and a couple of mouthfuls of rice.

That night, Mo Ran suggested that he move to the sofa now that the main room was of a habitable temperature, and he tried not to be upset when Chu Wanning didn’t object.

The next three days passed in much the same way – Mo Ran cooking, coaxing Chu Wanning to eat, organising antibiotics and painkillers, worrying; Chu Wanning refusing to leave the bedroom or bathroom, sleeping or staring into space, somewhere deep and far away.

Mo Ran felt like he was locked outside of a city’s walls, knowing that within there was rioting, an army running amok, looting and burning. Sometimes he was standing alone and forlorn outside the gates, and sometimes he was beating with his fists to be let in, but in either case, the way remained implacably shut, while Mo Ran could only watch the curling smoke and the licking flames, and hear the screams within.

He felt a ghost at his shoulder, waiting with him. It was the ghost of his own grief, when he had thought that Chu Wanning was dead.

In the end, not only were the gates opened, but the walls were torn down entirely. And it was done by the last person in the world that Mo Ran would have expected.

Monday morning brought four things: one fortnight since Chu Wanning's kidnapping, Christmas Day, Zhang Xinyi's next delivery of shopping, and the post.

Mo Ran brought it through into the bedroom. "Look, Wanning. Do you want to open it?"

"Nn."

He looked through the envelopes. Two looked like the usual bills, but one was printed, with a postmark he didn't recognise.

What if it was Hua Binan? "Or do you want me to open them for you?" he asked.

"Mn. If you want," Chu Wanning said in the same dead tone, staring at the same invisible spot on the wall.

It was not from Hua Binan. It was from the only person who might have been worse.

Dear Wanning – for you are dear to me, even if I have no legal or moral right to call you my son –

Please forgive the use of simplified characters in this letter; it is being dictated, and I had no choice in the matter.

If you are reading this, I am dead

"Oh, *fuck*," Mo Ran said before he could stop himself, and then cursed his dumb idiot self and his dumb idiot mouth as Chu Wanning rolled over.

"What?"

"Nothing," Mo Ran said, and winced, because that was a lie. "Something…"

"What?" Chu Wanning said again as he sat up. "What is it…?"

"I think it's…" Mo Ran whispered, and held the first sheet out between them.

Dear Wanning – for you are dear to me, even if I have no legal or moral right to call you my son –

Please forgive the use of simplified characters in this letter; it is being dictated, and I had no choice in the matter.

If you are reading this, I am dead. I do not have a will – everything I have belongs to you – but I asked my lawyer to send this only once I have been cremated and my ashes scattered. I am under no illusion that I deserve your mourning, and I did not wish to burden you with any responsibility for my remains.

Once, when you were my child, I punished you for asking about a shelf of books which I kept in my study. In my fury, I said that those books had killed your father. I denied that I had said this, but it was a lie. I was always too ashamed to tell you the story of how you came to live with me, but it is something that you must know, for I must ask a favour in connection with it.

I was born in 1950, and until the death of my father my childhood was a happy one. On account of its beauty, Hangzhou had been chosen by the Party to be transformed into an open city, in order to demonstrate to foreign visitors the success of the Communist enterprise. My father was a former PLA soldier and the Chief Registrar of the Zhejiang Party School, and I grew up proud of him and his place in the revolution. One of my happiest memories was from 1958, when the ZPS was merged with the Teachers' College, and Hangzhou University was founded. I carried a flag in the opening ceremony of Xixi campus, and I thought with a bursting heart that if I died that day, at eight years old, my life would have been a perfect one.

I did not know how right I was.

It was my father who died instead. Like many children I had longed for a PLA uniform and an armband of my own, but after his death I became fired with leftist fervour. I turned my grief into passion, and poured it into the Communist Youth League, organising singing parties and attending lessons on Maoist theory at night school. We no longer spoke Wu amongst ourselves, but Mandarin.

I was growing more and more disillusioned with the lessons of day school – what use was Classical literature when it should all be burnt? What use were sciences that were grounded in Western imperialism? But one teacher did not give up on me and my increasing rage and hostile zeal. Chu Xun, head of the physics department, had lost his wife four years before, at the birth of his son; I believe he recognised in me a fellow mourner. Or perhaps it was his innate compassion.

His patience only infuriated me. He defended intellectuals, the Stinking Old Ninth, and after that it was only a short leap to his being considered an anti-revolutionary, and a shorter leap after that to his being a reactionary. When we heard about the fever spreading through Beijing in the August of 1966, Chu Xun was in the very first list drawn up of academics whom we were going to encourage to 'self-transform', and so prove ourselves to be worthy of the esteemed title 'Red Guard' and the support of our hero.

That August was hot, over 32 degrees every day. I remember that Chu Xun didn't sweat even once when he was on the stage, as we screamed our imprecations at him, despite the heavy cone hat and the iron plaque around his neck. I was one of the youngest guards, only just allowed on the stage, and I had been given the responsibility of holding onto Chu Xun's four-year-old son, Chu Lan.

We had thought that his disgrace being witnessed by his son would break his spirit, but it seemed to strengthen him instead. Every time Chu Lan began to cry, Chu Xun would ignore us, and smile at his son instead, telling him that baba was fine, it was only a silly hat.

His kind voice and loving smile reminded me of my own father. And in the blinding heat of the noon sun, with the screams of the mob around us, he ignited a killing rage in me.

I slapped Chu Lan. The toddler. I wanted to shock the smile off Chu Xun's face, to make him acknowledge us instead of focusing on his son. And I was gratified to see that despite being the youngest guard, I *was the first one who had made him look anything other than dignified.* I *was the one who was the first to break him. So I hit Chu Lan again.*

The crowd couldn't see us, on the side of the stage. They could only see Chu Xun's growing distress, and began to surge forward in exultation. Chu Lan was screaming by now, and as I hit him again, Chu Xun screamed too. And when the mob screamed, I knew it was for me.

The power I felt in that moment was… 'intoxicating' is too weak a word. Ultimately, I was the one playing a crowd of a thousand people; I was the guard who was going to break Chu Xun. I thought that if Chu Xun refused the red of the revolution, then his son would wear a different kind of red instead, and so I hit him again, and again, and again. I lost count after ten.

Chu Xun struggled, trying to reach his child. Chu Lan struggled, trying to reach his father. I wrenched him back by his arm – his fat little arm, I was thinking, fat with the food that rightly belonged to the people instead of the spoilt son of a bourgeois intellectual – and I felt it click out of place. Chu Lan shrieked in pain, and Chu Xun wrenched himself free.

I was a coward. I pulled Chu Lan in front of me as a shield, and instead of pushing me away from his son, it was Chu Lan that Chu Xun barrelled into. Chu Lan fell off the stage, hitting his head on the corner as he went.

The crowd went completely silent. We knew instantly that Chu Lan was dead, just from the expressions on the faces around where he had fallen.

I refused to look at the body. And I knew it was a body, because the screams began again, but they were different. I fled the stage. That night, Chu Xun killed himself.

He'd known it. The one time he'd met Huaizui in the hospital, something deep in his gut had told him: This man is a murderer. Like you, this man is a murderer.

He thought that it just meant his stabbing of Chu Wanning.

The years the followed were difficult, as they were for everyone in our country. But I had abandoned all principles and ideologies, and it turned out that that was the key to survival. And then, as those of us who had survived began to rebuild our lives, my selfishness and amorality allowed me to thrive.

By day, at least. At night, Chu Xun and Chu Lan stood in my dreams, always silently accusing me. I had money, I had security, but inside I was collapsing. Every philosophy I turned to in the hope of comfort was lacking. This was when I renamed myself Huaizui.

1989, and the horrific memories it awoke, galvanised me to take action. The next three years were difficult, economically, and with the one child policy, orphanages were full of children. At first I made donations, but the dreams didn't stop. I woke one morning and realised that it wasn't enough to throw money at the problem. To atone for killing a child, I had to save a child.

I went to Hangzhou, my erstwhile home. In those days, to adopt a foundling, one had to be over the age of 35 and childless – both criteria I enjoyed. At first, I was treated as a king in the institutional home for abandoned children; as a single man, I could only adopt a girl who was more than forty years younger than myself (the naivety!), but there were plenty of girls under the age of ten. I could have had my pick.

But I did not want a girl. Chu Lan had been a boy, and the boy I sought to adopt would take that family name and carry on the Chu legacy. Finally, the head of the Child's

Institute revealed that there were boys available for adoption, but I would not want any of them. I asked to see them anyway.

The room she took me to was, as you will remember, the one in which they kept the disabled children. In there, I saw Chu Lan.

You were a little older, and solemn when I had always remembered Chu Lan smiling and laughing, but you were him, in the flesh. Reincarnated. You must have been a relative of some kind, to look so exactly like the Chus. The same shape to the eyes, the same pale skin, the same pointed chin. You were organising plastic bowls on the floor, lining them up according to their colour and size.

I asked what your illness was, and I was told that you were a mute, save for the occasional tantrum when something wasn't to your liking, or echoing the announcements on the tannoy. You often refused to eat, and would sit alone, rocking back and forth, screaming when you were touched or picked up. She said that you enjoyed the radio callisthenics programme, I remember – she said that you did not actually do the movements, but writhed or clapped your hands, and pointed at the radio to request it again. However, if the voice ever changed, or the hosts deviated from the usual routine, you would fly into a rage. One of the nurses had the clever idea of recording a broadcast onto a tape, and when I took you home they gave this to me as a way to calm you down.

I was torn. A child like that would not be a fitting replacement for the Chu family, but I couldn't discount the similarity in looks. It felt ordained.

The Head of the Institute told me a little about self-enclosure disorder, and she said that it was thought by some doctors that it could be cured, by rigorous training in proper manners. This decided it for me. My penance was not only to adopt a child; it was to cure one.

Of course, once I had brought you home to Wubei, I began to realise other things about you. You had taught yourself that characters corresponded to both sounds and concepts, and with that internalised, teaching you to speak when spoken to and to read was merely a matter of hard work on both our parts. You were like a sponge; you were learning thirty characters a day at one point. Within four months, by your sixth birthday, you had completed the primary characters. By the end of the year, you knew all the secondary

ones. The new doctor I brought you to said that you were not an idiot – you were an idiot savant.

I took this as confirmation that I was atoning for my crimes, because not only had I adopted Chu Lan, it turned out I had adopted Chu Xun as well. Both Chu Lan and Chu Xun had died before they could reach their intellectual potential, but through you, I could give them both that opportunity. I wanted to create something worthy of their name. If I could mould you into something extraordinary, then maybe their deaths had a deeper meaning.

Everything began to go wrong when we went to Oxford. I was no longer able to direct your learning as closely as before, and you developed a taste for independence. After that incident with the beggar boy in Linyi, I could sense your growing hostility to me – you were angry that I had pointed out that the child was a thief, probably belonging to a gang, and that you were only encouraging his exploitation by being so gullible. Then, by the time the earthquake happened in Sichuan, you were truly in your teenage period of rebellion.

I treated you terribly in that time. I know that now. Locking you up, not allowing you to see anyone else for months, haranguing you – I remember some of things I said to you. I hear them at night, before I fall asleep. What I said about you. About your illness. What I said about your mother. I mistook your principles for stubbornness and your dignity for sulking.

Since I had adopted you, I'd grown more and more prideful, and I refused to let myself lose in a battle of wills with a child – especially, as I thought then, a child who should be grateful and obedient to me. In my eyes, I had saved your life, and I had cured your mind. You owed both of them to me.

Mo Ran felt sick with grief and helpless rage. Chu Wanning was a faster reader than he was; he had turned over the final page and a long, low wail, like that of an animal in mortal pain, was being drawn out of his throat. Mo Ran's gaze tripped over the rest of the letter.

I have never been so angry as the night that you escaped. I held one of the shards of glass from the window; I still have the scar across my palm.

Please know that I never intended to kill you. I wanted to hurt you, yes, but moreso to scare you. You had made me feel powerless again, and I wanted to shock a reaction out of you. But when I heard that you had told your supervisor everything and that she had suggested you terminate the adoptive relationship, it was as though someone else gained control of my body. As though I was possessed by my own fury. I remember picking up the knife, and you didn't run away. You just stood there, silent, as I stabbed you. If you'd cried out, if you'd made a sound, if you'd cried like Chu Lan, I think I would have snapped out of it sooner. But your silence sounded like contempt, so I stabbed again.

I killed Chu Lan and Chu Xun. But in the end, I think I treated you worst of all, Chu Wanning.

I am sorry for everything I did, and for everything I didn't do. My only relief in this wretched thing I have made of our lives is that you are not my biological son, and that you hate me. Whether the taint in me is in my blood or in my soul, you share neither of them. The proof of it is in your character.

You are kind. It's a quality I failed to recognise in you. Of your kindness, I beg you to light incense for Chu Xun and Chu Lan. But if you can't bring yourself to do it, I understand.

Chu Wanning was sobbing, as violently as he had that night in Shanghai; his mouth was open in a silent scream, and he was seizing in a paroxysm of pain. The dam had finally broken, and he was swept away in his grief.

Mo Ran didn't think. He placed his arms around Chu Wanning and held him, kissing his hair and his ear in furious desperation. "You owe him nothing! Nothing, Wanning, *baobei*, nothing."

"Tighter!" Chu Wanning howled against his neck. "Tighter, *please, tighter!*"

Mo Ran shifted his position and squeezed, squeezed until his muscles protested that they were going to pop and he worried that he was going to break Chu Wanning's ribs. But he squeezed until Chu Wanning gave an infinitesimal sigh of relief and collapsed against him, as suddenly as a bowstring snapping, as slowly as a cliff falling into the sea.

Chapter 78: In Between Laughter and Tears

Chapter Summary

> And with this chapter, we pass a quarter of a million words! UTTER INSANITY.
>
> Thank you so, so, so much to everyone reading and especially commenting - it's been a hard few chapters for all of us, lol! 😭💀 But next chapter we have the return of our best boy, our Darling of the Heavens!
>
> I know that updates have been rarer than once a week - a mixture of life and exhaustion and wanting to reply to comments with the care they deserve, and to have the conversations that I love having! But I'd like to pick up the momentum a little through December, because it's likely to suffer due to various family duties. For that reason, I wondered if you'd forgive me if I didn't reply to comments in December, and in return I'll try to make sure there's three or four chapters out before 2025. I understand completely if this means you don't want to comment! But I thank you a thousand million times in advance if you do, because there is absolutely nothing more motivating, or more comforting in low-confidence moments! 💖

They leant against the headboard. Chu Wanning's knees were brought up tight to his chest, and he rested his cheek on Mo Ran's shoulder as he read and reread the letter, over and over again. Mo Ran kept his arm around him until it was numb.

"Wanning," he said gently. "Come on. Put it away for a little while?"

Chu Wanning sighed with bone-deep exhaustion and let Mo Ran take the pages from him.

"That helped, didn't it?" he asked. "The squeezing?"

"Mm." Chu Wanning's eyes were closed. "Pressure. Presses the buttons down. Pushes the electricity out of the nerves…"

"And that's a good thing?"

“Mm. Soft touch… soft touch wakes it up. Makes it too much. Hard touch depresses it. Presses the buttons. Stops the nuclear core from melting down…”

“Okay. I’ll be on squeezing duty whenever you want,” Mo Ran promised. He kissed Chu Wanning’s crown.

“What do I do now? I don’t know what to do…”

“Eat something later, drink something, take your pills. I’ll help you with all of that.”

“I mean about Huaizui. I mean about…” Chu Wanning shuddered. “About that little boy. I need to find out what happened to him. Where he’s buried.”

“You don’t. You really don’t, Wanning. That fucker should have just taken all that shit to his grave instead of burdening you with it. He had to get one final ‘fuck you’ in.”

“No. No. It’s not fair.”

Mo Ran sighed in relief. “No. It’s not.”

Chu Wanning inhaled shakily. “The wrong boy died.”

The floor opened up beneath Mo Ran; he fell into the pit. “What? What, Wanning- No!”

“No, that’s- That’s why it’s all wrong. Do you see? He was wanted. He was loved.”

“*You* are wanted,” Mo Ran said fiercely. “*You* are loved! Never, *never* say that again!”

“But not- Mo Ran. You don’t *know.*” Chu Wanning buried his face in the crook of Mo Ran’s neck. “You don’t know!”

“Then tell me. Talk to me.”

“I wasn’t meant to be in an orphanage,” he said. “I was meant to die. No. The passive is wrong. She left me at night, in the snow. She meant me to die.” Chu Wanning looked up, right at him. “I was eighteen months old. She tried. You see? She wasn’t some poor young… She tried, until she saw what I was. Then she thought I was better off dead.”

Mo Ran knew that Chu Wanning was from Hangzhou, but it was Linyi that he pictured. The alleyways full of slush and freezing filth, and instead of two hot pork bao left in a box, a little boy…

“Did she leave anything? A note?” he said desperately. Chu Wanning shook his head. “Then you don’t know that’s why she did it. It could have been anything.”

“It was me.”

“No, Wanning, it could have been *anything*. Did they even know it was your mum who left you? What if *she* died, and her parents couldn’t take care of you? What if she had some piece-of-shit boyfriend who wanted her child but couldn’t because of the Policy? Maybe he did it without her knowing. What if she went to work somewhere, and her shithead boyfriend decided that he wanted a son of his own? What if she had parents-in-law who decided it? You don’t know!”

Chu Wanning’s eyes were wider than Mo Ran had ever seen them. “But… but she left- I was left at night, in a temple garden, in the snow…”

“But before that, she tried for eighteen months, didn’t she? And if you were left in the snow, you were healthy enough to survive until someone found you. So she looked after you for

that time. She didn't hate you." Mo Ran looked at him very seriously. "I think what's more important is Huaizui. Did *he* ever say anything about her? Your mother?"

The room was reasonably warm, thanks to the oil radiator, but Chu Wanning's teeth were chattering. "I… If he was upset. If I'd made a mistake, or was being rebellious… He would say that he understood, why she'd… why she never wanted to look at me again."

Despite the stone of solid acid in the back of his throat, Mo Ran forced a smile. "I wish that he was alive, just so that I could kill him for saying that. It was *useful* for him, to make you so sure she'd abandoned you. Because then he could make you afraid that he'd do the same thing. He didn't know any more than we do – and we'd know if he did, because he wouldn't be able to resist putting that in this shitty letter either. But…"

It hurt him, to see the effect that word had on Chu Wanning's face, but this was important. Mo Ran shifted so that he was sitting on the bed facing Chu Wanning, and he took his hands.

"But this is what I really mean to say. It… Whatever your mother did or didn't do. Whatever Huaizui said. The wrong boy didn't die. Listen to me. I don't give a *fuck* about Chu Lan."

Chu Wanning's jaw dropped in shock. "*Mo Ran!*"

"Not one single fuck. I'm sure he was a sweet kid, it's very sad, whatever. He died decades before either of us were born. I don't care about Chu Xun either. If it was a choice between you dying and Chu Lan, I wouldn't hesitate for a second. I told you. I'm selfish. I'm sure it'd suck seeing Chu Lan on that stage, it'd suck seeing any kid hurt like that. But *you*… when I thought you were dead, I wanted to die too. I wanted to smash my own brains out on the table, because I couldn't… I didn't know how to carry on existing in that much pain. And I don't care if that makes me a bad person. I *know* I'm a bad person. And I also know that you are the best person in the fucking world, and I love you more than I love breathing."

The light from the window was lighting up Chu Wanning's eyes, sketching a comet across the blackness and casting an amber shadow within them. And the pupils moved, studying Mo Ran's face for sincerity, and Mo Ran smiled at him, remembering the agony of *Chu Wanning dead* and the overwhelming bliss of *Chu Wanning alive*.

Believe me, he begged in his heart, *please, I'm telling you the truth. I just need you to trust me in this. Believe me, please. Look at me. Look at me.*

As he always did, Chu Wanning answered his plea. It wasn't a smile – it was little more than a relaxation of the facial muscles. But it was there.

Mo Ran could feel his hands shaking.

He grinned. "I mean it. Fuck that dead toddler."

"Mo Ran! You can't *say* that – that's the most *outrageous*- the most- How could you say that?!"

"Fuck him. He was probably really annoying anyway. I bet he'd have grown up to be a prick if your dad hadn't killed him." His smile widened. "Well. I mean, *technically*, it was *his* dad that killed him."

Chu Wanning smacked his shoulder. "It was not!" His squawks of fury were collapsing into the giggles they were intended to cover.

"No, nonono, wait, wait: Chu Lan's father killed his son, your father tried to kill you – but what about *my* father? He tried to kill *you* as well – you stole my father-murder!"

"Your *filicide* – if a parent kills a son, it's called *filicide*," Chu Wanning gasped. "I failed as a teacher!"

Mo Ran recognised the breaking point milliseconds before Chu Wanning did. "No," he promised, and put his arms around Chu Wanning as his laughter shattered into sobs.

He wept for hours. The room darkened, but Mo Ran didn't move to turn on the lamps. He held Chu Wanning and stroked his hair when the crying was soft. When it began to gain

strength again, when his breath began to hitch and his shoulders began to jerk, Mo Ran tightened his grip and squeezed the painful energy out of him, until he collapsed once more, limp, a marionette whose strings had finally, at long last, been cut.

“Do you think you could eat something?” he asked quietly, when it seemed like Chu Wanning had exhausted himself.

“Nn.”

“Let me get you some hot water then.”

“No.” Chu Wanning looked up at him and dug his fingertips into Mo Ran’s ribs. “Please. Please don’t go.”

“Just to the kitchen.”

“Please!”

“Okay, okay. Okay. Come on, under the duvet at least.”

Chu Wanning allowed Mo Ran just enough movement to tuck the cover around them. Mo Ran waited for a few moments. “Talk to me?”

Chu Wanning didn’t reply, so Mo Ran didn’t push him. Instead he just carried on stroking his hair, just like his own mother had done when he had been upset.

“Do you think…” Chu Wanning started, and stopped.

“Think what?” Mo Ran tried to gentle him with a kiss. “What is it?”

Chu Wanning's voice was very quiet. "Do you think I should cut my hair?"

Mo Ran blinked; whatever he'd been expecting, that wasn't it. Chu Wanning hadn't mentioned it since that first feverish night. "It's your hair, so it's your choice. I know you'd look wonderful whether it was long or short. But why?"

"Huaizui always kept it short. So after he… you know. I started to grow it. It was a silly little rebellion, I suppose. Knowing that if he ever saw a picture of me, he'd know I'd rejected him. But now he's dead."

"Now he's dead," Mo Ran agreed. You couldn't ask Chu Wanning to talk about anything personal or emotional straight out; you had to sidle around to it, careful not to spook him and make him run into a tree or something. "So you don't need to rebel against him. You should have it however you like it best. Did you only have it long because you thought he'd hate it – do you not like having long hair?"

"No. I like it. But…" Chu Wanning drew a deep breath. "But there's the other thing. Hua Binan, and… Do you think maybe it's my hair?"

Mo Ran propped himself up on his elbow. "What do you mean?"

"I was thinking that I should cut it off in case… I wonder if it gives the wrong impression. If that's the reason."

Mo Ran pressed his molars together, just for a moment, until he felt the tension in his temples. "It's not that. I promise. The reason is because the three of us were evil, entitled shitheads. That's the only reason."

"But the length – it's different, it's *abnormal*, so people might think it's attention-seeking, that I'm inviting comment. Inviting other things."

“No. No, Wanning. Long or short doesn’t make a difference, and it’s nothing that you’ve done. None of this is on you. You can’t control how people act.”

“It’s not how most men wear it.”

Mo Ran made himself take a deep breath. “Maybe not. But there are plenty of men who do have longer hair. Are they inviting someone to assault them?”

“No…”

“No. Dummy.” Mo Ran softened the criticism with a long kiss. “You’re looking for reasons when they aren’t there.”

Chu Wanning was rubbing the fabric of Mo Ran’s top between his fingers. “You said once that you liked it. My hair.”

“I do. It’s gorgeous. But I bet if you cut it off I’d think that looked just as gorgeous. You could wear one of those half-shaven Qing queues and I’d probably think you were the sexiest person I’d ever seen.”

It was a desperate attempt, but Chu Wanning – his beautiful, perfect, thankfully-un-tonsured Wanning – actually turned his face and pressed it into Mo Ran’s chest with a small noise. As ever, his ears betrayed him.

Emboldened, Mo Ran ran his finger along the helix. “So, the real question is, do *you* like it long? You asked me once, what did *I* prefer, if there’s no one else to consider?”

Chu Wanning looked at him, a thoughtful line between his eyebrows. “I think… I think I like it long. I don’t like washing it sometimes, when I’m tired. But it’s easy to put in a knot or a ponytail, and I like the way it feels on my back. I feel like it looks all right – that if your hair is clean and tidy then people know that you’ve put some effort in, and forgive your face a little.”

As though Chu Wanning's face was something to be *forgiven*. "I really like this hairstyle on you," Mo Ran confirmed instead. "With these little wispy bits. It's softer."

"Really? I was thinking about growing them out. I thought you didn't like it…"

"Nooo, no. Fuck, I love it. I've always been obsessed with your hair, but when I saw you with that haircut, when you got off the train – *fuuuuck*, I thought, 'No wonder he's got women throwing themselves at him on the train!' You looked incredible."

"I thought you hated it. Your face…"

"I was pissed off, because I thought you'd got it cut to impress some hot Shanghai surgeon, and I couldn't compete with that, could I?" He strained his neck to nuzzle Chu Wanning's ear. "I can be a little jealous…"

"Can you?" Chu Wanning asked in a low voice.

"Mm hm. I wanted to be the only one allowed to put his hands inside you…"

"He's a *surgeon*, Mo Ran, you're ridiculous," Chu Wanning said. Then Mo Ran felt him tense. "But… If…"

"No." Mo Ran pressed his lips to Chu Wanning's ear. "I said 'allowed'."

"And… Technically. But they weren't…"

Mo Ran tightened his grip. "Tell me. If you want."

Chu Wanning's hand was fisting in the front of his top. "Not inside."

The sadistic bastard. "But he did use his hands?" Mo Ran continued, very, very carefully.

"He… Yes. At the beginning, still, when he was acting as though we were… That we could *ever* be… He used his hands, afterwards." Chu Wanning turned his head to focus on the damn wall again; his mouth was twisting. "I told him not to; I didn't want to–"

"I know, *baobei*, I know," Mo Ran said, and kissed him, quickly, chastely, on his temple.

"No, I need to… I didn't want it. Any of it. Not in my mind. But Hua Binan did things. And I – I mean, that *part* of me– The. You know. The *member*. I didn't want to. I didn't want *it* to. But it…"

When he'd been holding up Chu Wanning in that noose, and Chu Wanning had been panicking, Mo Ran had thought that keeping his voice as calm and reassuring as possible had been the hardest thing he'd ever done. This blew that out of the water.

"I know you didn't. The body sometimes reacts, and that's not… That's nothing to do with you. That's all *him*, playing fucking mindgames. Because he's a manipulative psychopath, and he got off on it."

"No, they were- Mo Ran… they were sexual things. Not giving *him* any pleasure, but…" Chu Wanning's mouth was skewed with the effort of saying this without breaking. He was squeezing his eyes shut, a sure sign that he was trying not to cry. "But I *did* react."

"I think," Mo Ran said slowly, "that forcing a reaction – and that's forcing just as much as anything else he did – a physical reaction… I think it probably did give him a kind of pleasure. It made him think he was in control. But he wasn't, do you see? A fucking *breeze* can make me hard sometimes. He couldn't control any other part of you but that, because he's fucking pathetic."

Chu Wanning shook his head, eyes still shut. “I didn’t want him to. I promise. I didn’t want any of it. But if you… If you did want to. Um. If you did want *us* to be… To really be… To be what I thought we were. I didn’t want there to be a lie of omission. If you thought that it was *cheating*, or that it was too disgusting– I, I understand if that makes you change your mind, you don’t have to pretend–”

Was *this* one of the soldiers that had been rampaging through Chu Wanning’s mind? Mo Ran felt the familiar red mist descending, and he waited it out. Getting angry that Chu Wanning thought that this might change Mo Ran’s mind about him – that wouldn’t help either of them. And Mo Ran had lost the right to be angry at Chu Wanning’s distrust for as long as they lived.

In truth, he wasn’t really angry at all. Chu Wanning’s morality could be rigid sometimes, particularly when it came to himself. Mo Ran had to remember that *this wasn’t about him*. It wasn’t even about Chu Wanning not trusting Mo Ran…

What if it was the opposite? What if Chu Wanning was voicing his fear, and perhaps instead he was asking for Mo Ran to tell him that it was all right? Asking Mo Ran to reassure him that he didn’t see him differently.

Perhaps Chu Wanning was actually trusting Mo Ran’s perception more than his own, and Mo Ran would reassure him as many time as he needed to, explain as patiently as Chu Wanning needed him to.

Or even… Fuck. Was this a *victory?* What Chu Wanning had just said: *“If you did want us to really be what I thought we were.”* Had the last few hours convinced him, even just a little, that Mo Ran was telling the truth? That he really did love him? Had he resat the exam and passed, or was *this* the test?

“Of course it doesn’t change my mind. Of course it doesn’t. Wanning,” he said, keeping his voice very calm and very gentle. “If a man punched me in the face, would that mean that I’d cheated on you?”

Chu Wanning blinked in confusion at him; his eyes finally opened in his shock, and Mo Ran was not surprised by the tears that fell. “Of course not. But it’s different–”

“Why not? If being touched by another man is cheating… What about if he stabbed me instead? Then would it be cheating?”

“No!”

“Exactly.” He tried to hold his own choking pain back, and smile reassuringly instead. “It’s violence, isn’t it? Not sex. It’s… a wound in a different part of the body. I know, I know it’s not – I know that it’s violation and humiliation as well, but at its core, you know? It’s violence. And you having violence done to you doesn’t make you unfaithful, or dirty, or anything else you’re thinking. It just makes me think how brave you are, and how all I want is to protect you and look after you.”

Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut again, and turned his face away. “… I *feel* dirty.”

“That’s okay,” Mo Ran lied, as though his heart wasn’t broken in his chest. “You feel what you feel, yeah? But you’re *not*, and the feeling will match the reality in time. It will. I promise. And until then I’ll tell you over and over again, until you’re so sick of me saying it you’ll have no choice but to believe it. I can be very annoying.”

Chu Wanning’s breath hitched, and he leant forward into Mo Ran’s arms, burying his face in his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You have nothing to be sorry for. And… I won’t ask you to promise not to worry about this, because I know *no one* can control what they feel, not just you. But instead… can you promise that if you *do* worry, that you’ll ask me about it again, like you did now? So that I can tell you again to put it out of your mind, that Hua Binan was a sick bastard and you’ve done nothing, *nothing* wrong, that you’re not dirty, and that I’m not pretending to overlook it or pretending to love you. Okay? Please?”

“I don’t want to be a burden,” Chu Wanning whispered, and Mo Ran could hear Huaizui’s ghost behind his lips.

“You won’t be. Remember: a student can resit as many times as they need to, right? So you can ask as many times as *you* need to.” Mo Ran smiled. “Every time you do you’re giving me an opportunity to resit the exam.”

Chapter 79: The Best Mirror

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so, so, so much for your comments, my dears! 😭💖 Whenever I felt myself flagging I would read and reread them, and every time it gave me a burst to write or rewrite a part of this chapter! A friend's eyes are the best mirror, after all, and so whenever I feel insecure your comments give me such a boost, and the confidence to try again and carry on!

The swollen Dadu River churned in shades of jade and celadon; the snow on the road below the balcony had turned into slush and grey ice.

It was a very austere *jingxiang* without any fruit or tea, or images or tablets, but Chu Wanning thought that Huaizui's letter would have to do for now. He held it in one hand, his fingers quickly going numb in the freezing air, and the three lit sandalwood joss sticks in the other.

Chu Xun, Chu Lan, and… And. He kept the conjunction in his mind, unwilling to commit to either possibility as to how the sentence should end – with a name, or with a self-correction. He tried to imagine what Mo Ran would say: there was no need to make a decision right now. *And.* It would have to do for the moment.

"What the *hell* are you doing on the balcony, it's freezing!"

Chu Wanning jumped a little, but Mo Ran's warm arms enveloped him immediately. He quickly stubbed out the incense sticks in the snow on the railing.

"Is that why?! Wanning!"

Chu Wanning felt his legs pulled out from under him; he yelped and automatically threw his arms around Mo Ran's neck. "Mo Ran!"

“And in slippers too! Gorgeous idiot.” Mo Ran took advantage of his position to kiss Chu Wanning’s cheek as he carried him back into the flat.

“Put me down, I can walk!”

Mo Ran paused for a moment, as though reluctant to let go of him, and then gently lowered Chu Wanning to stand beside the oil radiator. He immediately began to chafe Chu Wanning’s hands. “Absolutely chilled to the bone!”

Not entirely, Chu Wanning thought. His heart felt very warm, hearing the angry concern in Mo Ran’s voice.

“Don’t *fuss*, Mo Ran. I’m fine. I just need to stand by the radiator for a few minutes.”

“Or have a hot shower.”

For a brief, insane moment, Chu Wanning wondered what would happen if he were to invite Mo Ran to join him. But they were not in a luxury hotel in Shanghai – they were in Chu Wanning’s tiny flat, with a puttering showerhead above a bathtub.

And more importantly… In Shanghai, Mo Ran would have jokingly wheedled and begged to be allowed to join in, flirting and suggesting all the things they could do in the shower. Now he did not.

Chu Wanning understood. It was enough that Mo Ran could bear to touch him at all; he would not be so greedy as to ask for more. And whatever Mo Ran had said last night, Chu Wanning hated the idea of the skin of his body touching Mo Ran, smearing whatever filth Hua Binan had left on it onto someone so kind, so good.

Mo Ran kissed him again, and Chu Wanning pulled his hands free, so that he could snake them around Mo Ran's waist and lay his head on his clothed shoulder. He hesitated, unsure as to whether he was allowed to do this, but Mo Ran pulled him close with a sigh and held him tight. "I woke up and you weren't there," he said softly, and Chu Wanning understood a little better.

"You've been doing everything, I wanted to let you sleep in a little. And I thought outside, you wouldn't…"

"I'd rather smell incense than you be ill. Or worse," Mo Ran said. He was resting his cheek against the top of Chu Wanning's head, and Chu Wanning luxuriated in the weight of it. He had never thought he'd feel this again, and grieved it so deeply, but Mo Ran had thought he was already dead.

"Do you want to go out for lunch?" Mo Ran asked, and Chu Wanning froze.

It was stupid. Stupid beyond words, but the thought sent a jolt of panic through him and turned his spinal fluid to ice. Where would they eat? Would they be able to see every exit? What if Hua Binan poisoned them, or simply stabbed them both in the street?

"No, no, it's okay," Mo Ran said, rubbing his back. "It's fine. I'll make us some lunch, we've got plenty of bok choi and some of those frozen taro fish balls; I wanted to save the pork for dinner."

"I know that eventually… That we can't stay here forever. But…"

"I know – it's been a lot," Mo Ran said. "We've got plenty. I'll do something special with the pork tonight." He hesitated for a second. "Did you have any other plans for the day or…?"

"I think there's a couple of square inches of wall I haven't stared at yet," Chu Wanning said, turning his face into Mo Ran's neck. "No. Computer. I was reading the Rufeng evidence when… I should carry on with that."

“Are you sure? It’s hardly light reading…”

“Mn. There’s another two weeks of news to catch up on… and I want to know what the police know.” He didn’t say anything more, but he wasn’t surprised when Mo Ran hummed in acknowledgement. “Mngh. Shower first though.”

“Shower first,” Mo Ran agreed.

“Do I smell of incense?”

“You don’t *not* smell of incense,” he said, slowly letting go. “Go on. Wash that beautiful hair of yours.”

Chu Wanning lightly slapped his shoulder as he went, ears aflame. He turned on the shower to allow the water to heat up, and caught sight of his face in the mirror. He half-recognised the man staring back at him from the glass - not as himself, but as an old acquaintance, perhaps, spotted unexpectedly in an unpredictable place. It was probably an improvement.

He unbuttoned his pyjama shirt and assessed the damage. The lean muscle of which he’d once been secretly proud was long-gone, not yet returned after the bomb and his recovery in Shanghai. He needed to get back into the habit of daily callisthenics again. But the scabs and the bruises that marked the pale skin of his neck and chest were new – not brand new, of course, as they were the faded chartreuse that marked at least a week since the blows that caused them.

The larger ones were less offensive to him than the small, coin-sized ones on his hips. Like fingerprints.

He thought that he could hear the buzzer again as he studied himself, but it was the shower running. His eyes lingered on the curved scar over his heart; it was frayed, where the knife had gone in and out four times, but Huaizui’s aim had been quite astonishingly precise, despite his claims of being blind with rage…

He remembered the line from the *Shangshu*: Let people not look only into water; let them look into the mirror of other people. Hua Binan might have hidden that scar, but Mo Ran had kissed it. Into which mirror did he want to look?

The body is a bodhi tree; the mind is like a mirror…

Then, unmistakably, he heard the door open.

It *had* been the buzzer.

Chu Wanning wrenched the bathroom door open, and another bathroom door flooded his mind – Rong Yan, falling – Nangong Liu, watching. And then the world turned even crueller, because he heard Mo Ran cry out in pain, and the thump of his body hitting the floor.

He wrenched his *jian* from the wall, the metal one he used for tai chi competitions, and sprang into the main room, aiming the sword without hesitation for the front door.

"Chu-laoshi!"

The tip of the blade stopped inches from Xue Meng's neck; Chu Wanning almost fell backwards in his desperation to halt his forward momentum. He threw the sword to his side and heard it clatter on the floor.

Xue Meng stepped over Mo Ran, curled in a foetal position on the floor, and threw his arms around Chu Wanning in a skin-frying, bone-crushing hug.

"Mo Ran? Xue Meng, what did you *do*?"

"– I've been so worried, and Dad only said that you'd been hurt and that you'd decided to stay with this *DOG* despite knowing what he did to you, and Mum wouldn't say anything and they keep arguing –"

“He kicked me in the balls…”

“– and I don’t even know where you *were* and they said that it was that guy that came to your birthday, Hua Binan, and he’s Shi Mei’s *brother?!* And his sister is that bitchy policewoman –”

“I think I felt one of them pop…”

“Good! I’ll kick you again and pop the other one, then your brain might have a chance at getting some bloodflow for a change! You stupid bastard!”

“Xue Meng!” Chu Wanning yelped, and finally managed to distangle himself. He felt horribly, disgustingly aware that he was topless, that Xue Meng was microseconds away from seeing the debauched bruises and the hideous scars that marred him. Worse, in his mind’s eye, he could see the corruption of his touch seeping across Xue Meng’s body, spreading whatever rot was in him into the last innocent unfortunate enough to be trapped in his presence.

“You have to go,” he said, and the answering devastation on Xue Meng’s face made him feel like the worst person in the world. “You- you have to go, you can’t be here.”

“Why? Why can’t I? I haven’t seen you in so long, I haven’t seen you since you were *kidnapped*–”

“It’s *inappropriate!*” Chu Wanning shouted, voice shattering.

“Chu-*laoshi*, you’re literally fucking my cousin–” Xue Meng tried to retort, and Mo Ran rolled over with a groan to try to pull him down and silence him.

“It’s inappropriate, and I’m- and the shower is still going, and you kicked Mo Ran in the testicles–”

“I don’t understand!” Xue Meng wailed. “*He’s* the one who drugged you, *he’s* the one who hurt you, *he’s* the one who tried to trick you and who lied to you, but *I’m* the one who can’t be here? And he can?!”

“It’s not like that,” Chu Wanning said. He held out a shaking hand. “It’s good to see you. I wanted to see you, but I- Xue Meng. I *can’t* let you be in danger.”

“I’m not in danger!” Xue Meng protested, but his gaze had finally fallen, and his eyes were wide as he took in the sight of Chu Wanning’s chest. “Did he… Dad said he hurt you…”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine. But you have to *go*.” He had no dignity left to stand on, no pride, no face – he would beg if he had to. “Your father… he wouldn’t want you to be here. He doesn’t want us to be in contact, he- he wouldn’t want me to be near you. I’m not blaming him, he’s right, we both want you to be safe and not… I don’t want to be a bad influence on you.”

“*No*, Yuheng,” a deeper voice said from the doorway.

Chu Wanning froze like a hunted animal. He looked past Xue Meng’s tear-streaked face and saw Xue Zhengyong in the doorway.

He held up a bottle of Pear Blossom White.

*

By the time Chu Wanning had turned off the shower and hurriedly dressed in real clothes, clothes that felt stiff and unfamiliar on his skin, Mo Ran was able to stand again, though still pale and sweaty. He was waiting in silence for Chu Wanning, arms crossed.

“I told Mo Ran that his cousin wants to talk to him,” Xue Zhengyong explained, “but he didn’t want to leave you alone.”

“I won’t be alone. Xue Zhengyong is here,” Chu Wanning said firmly. “You two, stay together. Just… Promise me.”

“I promise,” Mo Ran said. “I’ll… We’ll go to the supermarket. Pick up some stuff.”

“Mn.” Chu Wanning shared a look, and waited for Mo Ran and Xue Meng to close the door behind them.

His heart was pattering in his chest, and when he went to fetch two glasses despite the early hour, he palmed a couple of propranolol pills as well.

“It’s not even noon,” Xue Zhengyong said.

“You’re the one who bought baijiu,” Chu Wanning pointed out, and Xue Zhengyong conceded the point with a smile.

He waited until Chu Wanning had sat down at his tiny table with him. “You look well.”

“Because Mo Ran’s been looking after me well,” Chu Wanning said. His treacherous hand was trembling as he poured the baijiu; a drop shimmered on the table.

“I didn’t tell Meng’er,” Xue Zhengyong said. He picked up his glass. “The specifics.”

Chu Wanning drank off the baijiu in one movement. It burnt all the way down. He refilled his glass. “I asked him to leave. I didn’t know he was coming here; Mo Ran opened the door.”

“I know.” Chu Wanning was refusing to meet Xue Zhengyong’s eyes, but he could feel his gaze on him like a tangible weight. “I never said I didn’t want you to see him again.”

Chu Wanning gave this statement all the respect it deserved. “I haven’t contacted him.”

“I know.”

All week he had longed for Xue Zhengyong to appear, and now he just wanted him to leave. Why was he here? “I assume this is an analgesic for whatever you need me to sign, and I’m grateful, but could we just… I’ll sign it now.”

“Oh, *Yuheng*.” Xue Zhengyong’s voice had a crack running through it. “It’s an *apology*, not an analgesic. There’s nothing to sign.”

Chu Wanning dared look up, just for a moment, and the expression on Xue Zhengyong’s face was like a needle in his eyes. He looked down again. “There’s no need to apologise. You were all worried on my account. Mo Ran was arrested on my account. And then I was- I was rude. I was rude to you.”

“I think we can all understand why you might have been a little short. You were in a lot of pain.”

“I told your wife to fuck off.”

Chu Wanning heard Xue Zhengyong’s hesitation; he didn’t think he’d ever heard him swear. “She said that she gave you little choice but to. She’s written you a letter.”

Another letter. Chu Wanning wanted to crawl back into bed. “You accepted my resignation, but I… You’ll need it in writing…”

“I’ve not mentioned it to anyone,” Xue Zhengyong said. “That’s what the baijiu is. An apology. Please. Please don’t resign.”

“You said–” He stopped and ground his teeth. He sounded like a child. “It was my judgement you disagreed with. My judgement hasn’t changed. On the contrary.”

“I don’t understand,” Xue Zhengyong admitted. “How you could forgive him so quickly.”

“He was manipulated. But more importantly, he has confessed.” Chu Wanning finally met Xue Zhengyong’s gaze. “In the Public Security Bureaus, all the posters say the same thing: *Leniency to those who confess*. He confessed to them, to you, to me. How could I be less merciful than the police to *anyone*? Let alone to someone as good as Mo Ran.”

Xue Zhengyong groaned. “I’d forgotten how impossible it is to argue with you!”

“I’m not arguing. I’m not saying what *you* should do or not do,” Chu Wanning said. “You asked me how I could forgive him, and I answered. Was that not what you were really asking?”

He sighed. “Ah, Yuheng. No. I suppose what I’m asking is, how can *I* forgive him? He hurt my friend.”

Chu Wanning looked at the table for a second, thinking. “So have you,” he finally said. Because he could understand Xue Zhengyong’s absence for the last week, but comprehension couldn’t entirely ease the pain of it. “So have I. So has your wife, whom you love more than anyone in the world… We all hurt each other. But he’s saved me too. As have you. As has your wife.”

“My wife… The two of you, you and my wife. I’ve forgotten what it was like to be on the receiving end of your arguments, instead of a witness enjoying them from the sidelines. She was even harsher: ‘When you thought he was your blood-nephew and a rapist, you let him into our house.’” Xue Zhengyong rubbed his eyes. “All four of you are going to be the death of me if you team up like this. I was shocked by it, Wanning. Genuinely shocked. I still am. How can you be so forgiving?”

Chu Wanning thought for a moment. “If Wang Chuqing had deceived you, then told you later. If she was truly remorseful for having hurt you… Wouldn’t you forgive her?”

“That’s different.”

“No. It isn’t.”

Xue Zhengyong looked at him. “It’s really like that?”

“It’s really like that. And…” Chu Wanning pulled Huaizui’s letter out of his pocket. “Read this.”

He scanned the first paragraph. “’If you are reading this’- Yuheng, I’m so sorry–”

“No, no, carry on.” Xue Zhengyong read through the pages, and then Chu Wanning reached across the table to point out the important paragraph. “There.”

“Where – this line? *After that incident with the beggar boy in Linyi, I could sense your growing hostility to me –*”

His head jolted up in astonishment. Chu Wanning nodded.

“I know. Know *now*, at least, but neither of us *knew*. It was only when he told us all in Shanghai… It was my funding meeting, for the doctorate at Rufeng. So, you see… Even if I weren’t in love with him, I’ll never abandon him again.” The words and his own honesty embarrassed him, but if explaining this could go even an inch towards giving Mo Ran his family back… “I can’t.”

“Talk about a red string of fate… I can’t believe it,” Xue Zhengyong said, and gave truth to his words by pouring out more baijiu.

Chu Wanning tapped the table in thanks and drank – more slowly, this time. “I really do believe him, Zhengyong. How guilty he feels. He’s been so kind to me, since… I don’t know what I would have done without him.”

Xue Zhengyong sighed. Then his clinked his glass against Chu Wanning’s. “I suppose I’d better let Wifey know it’ll be two more to dinner tonight then.”

The corners of Chu Wanning’s eyes prickled with heat. “No spice?”

“No spice. If there’s no more talk of resigning.”

Chu Wanning nodded despite the lump in his throat. “Deal.”

“Deal.” They drank for a second in silence, and Chu Wanning felt some of the pain in his chest bleed away. “How *are* you doing?”

“Fine.” Chu Wanning gave a one-shouldered shrug. “What about you?”

“Terrible. Wifey’s not been speaking to me, and once I told Xue Meng about it he’s been giving me the cold shoulder too.”

It felt like the offering of some familiarity, the forced levity, so Chu Wanning resumed his usual role and made a face of concern. “Better the cold shoulder than what he gave to Mo Ran, I suppose.”

Xue Zhengyong’s lip quirked. “I was tempted myself. But… I agree with you. When he told me all of it, while Wifey was looking you over, I could see how remorseful Ran’er was. I suppose that’s all we can ask for, isn’t it? There’s no changing the past, only working on the

future.” He looked over the rim of his glass. “You’re not a bad influence on Meng’er. Quite the opposite. I know that Wifey and I spoil him a little – a lot, maybe – but he’s growing up into a good man. And sometimes, the best things he says are things that I can hear your voice in.”

The baijiu was hot in the back of his throat. “He’s the only one who hasn’t… I don’t know what’s happened, Zhengyong. I don’t understand it. I wanted to keep him untouched by it.”

“How could he be untouched by it?” Xue Zhengyong said. “He loves you.”

Chapter 80: When Time Shall Call Him Home

Chapter Notes

> Again and again and again, I cannot thank you enough for all your encouragement, kindness, jokes and analysis! It has made the month so much easier to cope with, and I'm so grateful to you all. Chag Hanukkah Sameach, Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays! Whether you're celebrating anything or not, I hope you all have a wonderful week! 💖✨🥂

The air outside sat as cold and heavy in his mouth as a stone. It sent chills all over his face and down his back, and he was surprised the sweat there didn't instantly freeze. Mo Ran had let Xue Meng go ahead, walking down the stairs of Chu Wanning's building with what he hoped looked like a kind of stately dignity.

Xue Meng looked askance at him as he held the front door open. "Did I really pop one of your balls?"

Mo Ran rolled his eyes. "No."

"Shame. You know, if there's ever a 'next time', I won't just kick them. I'll… I'll throw some liquid nitrogen on them and smash them, and your dick too."

"Aww, then it'll be the same size as yours!"

"Oh, har har, you piece of shit!"

"Don't worry, I don't think that's what Mei Hanxue is interested in…"

“Fuck off!” Xue Meng’s hands were shoved deep in his pockets, and he angrily stomped on the ice. Wuchang had a few small shops, and two supermarkets – a three-aisler near the university, closer to where Mo Ran and Chu Wanning lived, and a six-aisler in the very centre of the town. “I can’t believe what a bastard you are. How could you do that to him?!”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?!”

“I mean, there’s no excuse I can offer. It was the worst thing I’ve ever done.”

“Yes. Well.” Mo Ran’s simple agreement seemed to take the wind out of Xue Meng’s sails. “Mo Ran. What is it that everyone’s not telling me?”

Mo Ran stared ahead. “What do you mean?”

“Like that – exactly like that! I’m not *stupid*. I know there’s something that no one’s saying. Mum and Dad – Mum is saying that she wronged Chu Wanning somehow. She said she couldn’t face him, she sent a letter with Dad instead. And they’ve been fighting. And… It makes no fucking sense. None of this makes… Why the fuck does Hua Binan hate *you* so much? Because the only thing I can think of is if he likes Chu Wanning, and if he does, why would he hurt him?”

Mo Ran felt a riot of emotions: affection and anger both, at Xue Meng’s view of the world. And relief, that Xue Meng had stumbled upon a suitable lie he could give. “Yeah. That’s it. And Chu Wanning told him to fuck off, and that’s why he hurt him. Because he was rejected.”

Legally speaking, it had only been possible for an adult man to be raped for the last eight years – it wasn’t going to occur to Xue Meng as a possibility. And if it did, he’d be too uncomfortable with the thought – about any man, sure, but *especially* someone he admired so much – to do anything other than immediately dismiss it.

Xue Meng drew a long breath. “For fuck’s *sake*. And his… He must have beaten him to shit. That bastard!”

“Yeah.” Mo Ran shoved his hands deeper into his pockets and picked up his pace.

“But… Mo Ran. Um.”

“We need staples,” Mo Ran said, before even Xue Meng realised there was more to it. “Frozen stuff. Stuff that’ll keep.”

“Okay… why?”

Because he didn’t know when Chu Wanning would be ready to leave the flat. “Just because that’s what we’ve run out of.”

He wanted to send Xue Meng off to buy vegetables or something, but he trusted Xue Meng when it came to cooking less than… well, Chu Wanning. At least Chu Wanning could make at least three dishes, and had kept himself alive through his twenties.

Besides, Chu Wanning had made them promise to stick together.

But it hurt. Not his groin – no, that *did* still hurt – but this tantalising suggestion that he could endure a kick to the balls and some verbal abuse, and he and Xue Meng could be cousins again. Was that possible? Was that what it was like in a normal, real family? He and Chu Wanning were as bad as each other when it came to ignorance of family dynamics.

“It was bad,” he said quietly, as he tested yams. “He didn’t just punch him or whatever. Hua Binan. He… I don’t know much. I’ve gathered some bits, from when Wanning was delirious. He’d never say anything otherwise. But Hua Binan used drugs. Paralytics. Then he threatened you. Threatened me. Said he’d hurt us in front of Wanning, and that he couldn’t do anything to stop him, and the sadistic bastard got off on watching him struggle. Watching him

scared. He beat him with a candlestick. Strangled him. He used… There were knife marks. Burns. And he said he'd do the same to us."

Mo Ran looked down at Xue Meng, and his white face made his heart ache. "I'm telling you this because… Because it's been really bad, Xue Meng. It's been… Wanning- Chu Wanning's doing much better today than he has all week. He could barely move the first few days. He wants to play it down. You know what he's like; making a fuss will embarrass him. But the reason he said those things to you–"

Tears, always so humiliatingly close these days, sprang to his eyes without warning; Mo Ran looked up and down the aisle to make sure they were alone, and bit the inside of his cheek. He focused on the shelves of noodles behind Xue Meng.

"You know what Shi Mei did to him. You know the evil, disgusting thing *I* did to him. And then Hua Binan… That's three out of his four students. He thinks that *he's* the common denominator. He thinks that it's his fault. So he wants to protect you from himself. Because you're the only–"

Despite his best efforts, the tears fell. He turned around sharply and wiped his face, wiped his nose. "You're the only good one of us."

He tried to focus on the box of radishes; they blurred into a white mass. He heard Xue Meng swallow.

"But that's not… It's not *his* fault…"

"I know that. You know that. But he… He thinks statistically. And he doesn't know what he looks like, or why entitled bastards would… *He* would never do anything like that to someone, so he can't understand why anyone else would. How anyone else could. And he thinks your dad thinks the same thing, so that's why he told you to leave. It's not because he didn't… It's because he didn't want you to be hurt or tainted by him."

"That's dumb."

Mo Ran could hear the tears in Xue Meng's voice. A couple of students, laughing loudly and shrieking over something, barrelled into their aisle; Mo Ran hurriedly wiped his face again.

"Yeah. Could you- Rice. We need rice. He likes the sticky kind."

"Yeah. Sure, yeah – this?"

Mo Ran nodded, and threw the bag into the basket. He felt like an idiot, crying in a supermarket, but Xue Meng deserved to know this much at least.

"What do we do now?" Xue Meng asked in the next aisle.

It felt easier to talk without looking at each other, somehow, and Mo Ran addressed his answer to the bags of frozen seafood mix. "What Chu Wanning wants. That's what we do. He's the one who- Whatever he wants to do, we do. And… I know I don't deserve anything from any of you again. I know that. But in front of him, we should be… It upsets him. He thinks that he's the one who broke… who destroyed our…"

Who destroyed our family. The family that never existed. Mo Ran had created it out of deceit, and then he had shattered it with deceit as well. The Xues were good and kind, and Mo Ran had brought them misery upon misery in repayment.

"I'm not saying it for my sake. I don't know how to convince you of that, but I'm really not. But in front of him, let's just not be too… Outside, you can say whatever you want to me. Do whatever you want. I deserve it. Fuck, I think I'd feel better if you went for me. But I want to keep everything soft and quiet and nice for him. No shouting. No violence. Nothing that'll make him think about… He deserves to be looked after, and no one has, and so I…"

There was moment of silence to his left. The loud girls in the side-aisle were joined by a third voice; they were talking loudly about a Christmas date one of their boyfriends had bought them on.

“Okay,” Xue Meng said. “Only kick you in the dick when he’s not around. Roger.”

“Thanks.” Mo Ran tried to smile. “That’s generous of you.”

“Well, it’s for him, not for you,” Xue Meng said, but there was no malice in his voice. “You’re so fucking stupid.”

“I am.”

“I always said it. I’m the smart one.” Xue Meng sidled alongside him as Mo Ran filled the basket. “But… However stupid you are. Dad told me the rest of it too. And the police.”

“Oh, that.” Mo Ran dismissed it with a gesture, and reached for a bottle of soy sauce. “I was beyond caring at that point. When I began to think that maybe he really was dead… God, when they said they’d found his jumper with blood on it – what did anything matter after that?”

“But I’ve heard what it’s like, in the bureaus. And what that woman did to you. Not letting you eat. Not letting you sleep.”

There was genuine concern in Xue Meng’s voice, or so he thought. Mo Ran turned to look, and it was really there, written on his face too.

Oh, fuck it. He dropped the basket with a rattling clang, and hugged his cousin.

Xue Meng stiffened in his arms, but then Mo Ran felt one hand snake around his back.

“Groping me now too, *ge*? Pervert.”

Mo Ran snorted, and something painfully like relief bubbled in the back of his throat. "What's there to grope? It takes two Meis just to find something…"

"You're fucking obsessed." Xue Meng finally pulled away, and kicked Mo Ran's shin lightly. "Is it because they're blond?"

"It's because they're twins," Mo Ran said with a damp laugh. He swiped at his eyes. "That's kinky as fuck."

"Gross! Urgh, you're such a fucking freak!"

"And now I'll never have the chance to do two twins at once, so I'll have to live vicariously through you."

"You're going to be waiting a long fucking time! They're *friends* – though, knowing you, have you ever had a friend you *didn't* want to fuck?"

Mo Ran smiled down at him with naked affection. "Only one, Mengmeng. Only one."

"Who- me? *Me?!*"

"We're cousins, aren't we? I suppose 'friend' is stretching it–"

"Not blood cousins!"

"You didn't know that."

“But *you* knew it! Why me – why wouldn’t you want to fuck me?”

“Do you *want* me to want to fuck you?”

“No!”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“You’d fuck anyone *except* me! How am I meant to take that as anything other than an insult?”

Thank fuck for the Mei Hanxues, Mo Ran thought as they waited at the check-out; they were always guaranteed to make Xue Meng flustered. He turned on his automatic charm for the cashier, who roundly ignored him in favour of listening to the radio she had taped to the underside of her till.

“– breaking news regarding the Rufeng University terrorist incident in Linyi last month –”

Mo Ran stopped packing and waved a hand at Xue Meng to shut up.

“– we have heard that Commissioner General Kong Liuxian is due to make a statement to the press regarding their investigation at noon –”

Mo Ran looked at his phone. “Shit. We have to go – Mengmeng, take this bag.”

“Why should I have to carry–”

“Just take the bag, for fuck’s sake. You wanted to know what's going on – there’s going to be an announcement in four minutes. It’d better not be some bullshit…”

Again, he resisted the desire to sprint ahead. He wished suddenly that he'd kept up with the Rufeng news – he had no idea what stage the investigation was at.

He had brought the keys to the flat with him, so that he didn't have to spike Chu Wanning's heart-rate by using the buzzer. Chu Wanning and Xue Zhengyong were sitting at the little table, with an open bottle of baijiu between them.

Chu Wanning looked up, and Mo Ran's heart flipped over when he smiled. A sigh shuddered out of him, and he toed his slush-soaked shoes off.

"Big noon Rufeng announcement," he said quickly. "It'll be on CNC."

He hated himself for saying it, when Chu Wanning's smile instantly faded. He didn't own a television, so he picked up his laptop and opened it to find a livestream. It looked like he and Xue Zhengyong had drunk about a quarter of the bottle already, but that much wouldn't touch Chu Wanning, even on antibiotics.

"– of the eleven suspects, four were apprehended and seven were killed in the course of the arrests. Two members of the Blue Sword Commando Unit sustained minor injuries and are expected to make full recoveries. Among those killed was the group's ringleader, Li Yuxan, who is understood to have taken over the running of the so-called Shadow Guard criminal organisation after the death of Nangong Xu in Linyi last month."

"Li Yuxan," Chu Wanning whispered. He was gripping his half-empty glass of baijiu so tightly that Mo Ran was surprised it didn't shatter. The liquid trembled against the sides. "That's who Hua Binan called from here. He's the one who put the bag over my head."

Mo Ran had been watching over Chu Wanning's shoulder. Ignoring his uncle and cousin, he bent at the waist, put his chin on Chu Wanning's shoulder, and held him tight. "And in Rufeng… Nangong Xu asked what name he'd use, his second-in-command. He said his own, and Nangong Xu said, 'Good luck, Yuxan'."

“Mn. I think I remember something like that…”

“You were a little tired at the time,” Mo Ran said, and pressed a quick kiss to Chu Wanning’s beloved temple.

“– gang is thought to have recently been in operation in Sichuan, and the operation to apprehend its members took place in Fujian.”

“Thank you, Commissioner General Kong, for your statement and your hard work in the neutralisation of this extremely dangerous group of criminals. This statement follows that given by the Government one hour ago, that 60% of the 22 billion yuan stolen from Guyueye Pharmaceuticals has been recovered and confiscated by the State Treasury, pending investigation into Guyueye’s potential culpability or negligence, under Article 64 of the Criminal Code. Further to this, the names of all estimated carriers of the genetic illness known as Butterfly Bone Syndrome have also been seized by the Government, who reiterated today that anyone included in these lists is expected to voluntarily submit financial statements for government audit to ensure that no stolen funds have been received.”

“I thought…” Chu Wanning turned off the sound as the broadcast went onto the next story. “I thought Jiang Xi said that he was willing to let the money go as compensation? I read it in Shanghai; he said that proper renumeration should have been paid years ago…”

Xue Zhengyong shook his head. For some reason, he cast a glance at Xue Meng. “He *did* say that, but the Government made him walk it back. It was announced on our way here – they were probably waiting for the criminal side to be wiped out before they released it. He’s been banned from using his own funds either. Apparently it would just encourage similar crimes in the future; no one can be seen to be benefitting from hacking and theft. Not great for public order.”

Mo Ran was still holding Chu Wanning; he could *feel* him thinking. “What is it?”

“Hm? Nothing.” Chu Wanning sighed, and shrugged his arm off. “No, nothing. But they’ve caught them. That’s… That’s a good thing.”

“It is, Yuheng,” Xue Zhengyong agreed, reaching across the table to shake his arm. “So no worrying, eh? Listen, read that letter, and I’ll send Meng’er by at seven to pick you up.” He looked up at Mo Ran. “Both of you. Your auntie’s putting effort into the meal, so wear something nice.”

Mo Ran’s breath stuttered in his chest; for a ludicrous second, he remembered Hua Binan telling him that he had barotrauma, that he’d had the air knocked out of him. “Y-yeah. Yes, I mean. Thank you.”

“Mn.” Xue Zhengyong stood up. “And put that shopping away – aiyo, I was going to say that it’ll defrost if you leave it out for so long, but there’s no chance of that in here! Don’t you have central heating?”

“Mo Ran bought us some oil radiators; it’s much warmer than it was.”

“I don’t believe you! You’re a terrible liar. Right, seven – come on, Meng’er.”

They waited in tense silence for the Xues to leave, and then Chu Wanning relaxed with a sigh.

“It went okay?”

Chu Wanning nodded. “It went okay. I just want to sleep again now.”

“What did he say?”

“He apologised. He said he hadn’t processed my resignation, so I still…” Chu Wanning rubbed his eyes with a shaking hand, and stared at the envelope on the table. “Your aunt sent me a letter.”

Mo Ran kissed his hair. “Shower first. You can read it later. You’ll feel a bit more ready to face it then.”

“Mn.” Chu Wanning finally stood up, stiff and awkward; he’d not sat on the hard chair until now.

Mo Ran felt a great wave of grief and pride wash over him. He smiled until he heard the bathroom door lock and the shower start up, and then dropped it. He sank down onto the now-hated sofa. What now? Was it even possible, that he could have both Chu Wanning and his family? Was redemption really-?

His phone buzzed with a text notification and he fished it out of his pocket. For a moment he thought it would be Xue Meng, finally beginning his never-ending stream of inane outrages again.

It wasn’t. It was an unknown number, and the world came crashing down around him.

I just saw your spoilt brat of a cousin and your idiot uncle leaving Wanning’s building.

Mo Ran stood up and went to wrench open the door to the balcony, when sense stayed his hand on the handle.

If Hua Binan was watching…

I think Wanning’s birthday dinner was the longest night of my life, you know. A-Jing had always said how annoying you all were – Wanning excepted, of course – but I have no idea how he lasted so long. He’s more patient than me. I wanted to poison the breakfast the next day.

If Hua Binan had a gun…

Aren't you going to come out, Mo Ran? I think I can see you.

The phone rang.

Chapter 81: The Mantis Stalks the Cicada

Chapter Notes

> Happy New Year, and here's to 2025 - may she be kind! 🎇 Thank you for all of your amazing comments, and for continuing to read The Behemoth - I can promise at least that it will be finished this year...! 😧

Mo Ran let the phone ring. Instead of answering it, he quickly saved the number under the name *Hua Binan*.

You don't fancy talking on the balcony? Aren't you worried that Wanning will overhear us?

Mo Ran let go of the balcony handle. He looked across the river. Chu Wanning's building immediately overlooked the Dadu, and across the way there were only the mountains and the trees, stark and snowy. Where was Hua Binan? Across the river, with binoculars? He couldn't be on the narrow footpath between the building and the river; he wouldn't be able to see inside Chu Wanning's top-floor flat at that angle.

What's wrong? Don't want to talk?

what makes you think i'd want to hear your voice?

I thought we had things to talk about. But if you want to hear a different voice instead…

A new message was sending. A blurred image appeared in the WeChat box, and the buffering icon spun.

The blurred image sharpened into a room, seen from an upper corner, containing a bed with a dark shape on it, and a barred window above it. Mo Ran's thumb shook as he pressed the triangle to play the video.

With movement, the dark shadow on the bed turned out to be two bodies, not one. And the kind of movement was instantly recognisable.

Mo Ran blacked out. He staggered back, unable to believe what he was seeing – unable to believe that someone could be so evil, so cruel. What had he or Chu Wanning ever done to Hua Binan, that he could hold onto this video as a sick trophy and send it to him?

On the two-inch screen, Mo Ran saw Hua Binan slap Chu Wanning as clearly as though he was in the room. But then there was some other movement from Hua Binan, a pulling back followed by a violent shove of his right arm, and Chu Wanning's scream of pain distorted through the speaker of Mo Ran's phone.

Mo Ran nearly dropped the phone. He backspaced digitally while physically stepping backwards until his back hit the wall and his head hit the frame of one of Chu Wanning's star-maps, as though that would put distance between himself and the phone in his hands.

As you can see, he loved it.

Mo Ran closed his eyes, but he could still see it. Hear it. Was that the fucking candlestick? Or something else?

The phone clattered on the floor; his numb hands had dropped it. He scrabbled for it, and when he turned it over again, there was a new message.

I'm waiting downstairs, at the building's front door. Let's sort this.

He ran. His foot caught on the rug, and he barely noticed; he nearly tore the muscles in his leg, but managed to turn the trip into a leap for the front door. His hand closed around the

brand-new lock he'd put in-

And beneath the lock, the latch. The latch he'd always told Chu Wanning to put on.

He didn't know whether the fist in the back of his throat was acidic air or bile.

Mo Ran's trembling fingers ran across the latch. Chu Wanning had put the latch on, the day he'd been kidnapped; it had still been together, when Mo Ran had picked it up off the floor.

Right now, Chu Wanning was in the shower.

He slammed the phone down on the kitchen counter. Think! Fucking *think*.

He couldn't. The pain and the rage were too much; the only thing he could do was race down the stairs and choke the life out of Hua Binan.

The phone beeped with another message.

What's keeping you? The video's twenty seconds long. Are you watching it again? You fucking pervert.

No need to watch it on repeat, Mo Ran. I have loads of them. Do you want to see the one where I got the blood for the jumper? It's amazing what you can do with one scalpel if you know where to cut.

Mo Ran's fingers slid down the doorframe.

Or do you just not care? Don't give a shit what I did to him? He called me A-Nan while he begged for your life, thinking it'd make me happy. He said he'd do anything if I didn't hurt

you. He said he'd stay with me forever. And you won't even walk down the stairs.

Another video appeared, clearly shot in the same room.

These aren't the important messages, Chu Wanning whispered in the back of his mind. *Think logically. Look back.*

He'd thought it, just a minute ago. What if Hua Binan had a gun? If Mo Ran were to run down, blind with fury, Hua Binan could shoot him the second he stepped out. Mo Ran would have acted like a dumb dog, coming when whistled, and there'd be no one between Hua Binan and Chu Wanning, oblivious in the shower, not knowing that Mo Ran was bleeding out like a *dead* dog in the street below.

Mo Ran drew a deep, shuddering breath. His head was spinning; sucking down thin, poisonous air took all of his energy for a second. He forced himself to think about Chu Wanning, curled up against him. Not Chu Wanning on that bed.

Chu Wanning asking him whether he should cut his hair. Not Chu Wanning screaming in pain.

He waited until his hands had calmed down enough to type. Then he messaged back.

lol

There was a long moment in which Mo Ran thought, not without a touch of hysteria, that he could *hear* Hua Binan's outrage. He watched the ellipsis appear, disappear, appear again.

Hua Binan rang again. Mo Ran declined the call again.

The ellipsis appeared, throbbing like a vein in a forehead, until the message appeared:

You think this is funny?

Mo Ran replied.

I think YOU'RE funny 😂😂😂

Did you really think that would work lol 💀

Wanning was right about you

Not much going on behind your pretty face is there??? 💋

All the while, Hua Binan had been typing back.

Don't pretend to be confident with me. I've heard all about your snivelling and crying and confessing. As for who's stupid, your hand was on the fucking door handle.

Mo Ran blinked in surprise, and looked out of the balcony window. Hua Binan must be directly opposite, if he was able to see to the other side of the room, where the front door was.

You don't even know how fucking stupid you are, and you think you can talk like that to me?

Hua Binan was *pissed*. Three more videos came, one after another; Mo Ran didn't play any of them.

lol

thanks for all the video evidence dumbass

Then, with the speed he had learnt from his toxic relationship with Song Quitong, he blocked Hua Binan's number.

Mo Ran finally exhaled, and his breath caught on a sob. His shaking knees threatened to give out, and he made it to the sofa before he collapsed onto it.

His thumb hovered over the icon to play the latest video.

What was better? Was it better to know what Hua Binan had done? He remembered Chu Wanning slapping him when Mo Ran smoothed his hair over his chest; would it be better to know what he had to avoid? Or would watching this be another invasion of Wanning's privacy?

Yes, he decided on instinct. Yes. He was happy to let Wanning slap him instead, if that's how he reacted. Let him slap him, and then, hopefully, explain. Mo Ran could give that to him at least.

As the heartbeat in his ears began to fade, he realised that the shower had stopped running. The desire to hide the messages was almost overwhelming, but he had promised to tell Chu Wanning everything from now on. And that meant this disgusting filth as well.

He wondered idly whether Hua Binan was still outside, using himself as bait for Mo Ran. His brain was trying to tell him to stay, but his hands itched to strangle him, his ears longed to hear his death rattle, his eyes wanted nothing more than to see the blood vessels bursting in Hua Binan's.

Instead, they saw Chu Wanning step into the main room. He was wearing his warm flannel pyjamas and slippers, and was towelling his long hair dry.

Oh, Mo Ran thought. He was so stupid.

Chu Wanning caught the expression on Mo Ran's face and went straight to him. "What's wrong? Is it still hurting? Your… area?"

Mo Ran couldn't help but snort; he'd completely forgotten, which was hardly an easy feat. "No. No. Just looking at you."

"Oh." Chu Wanning's eyes sketched over his face, and Mo Ran could hear the gears whirring. "You don't look very happy…"

"Argh," Mo Ran said matter-of-factly. "Come back into the bedroom. Sit down."

Chu Wanning looked disconcerted while he allowed himself to be led. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Mo Ran shut the door and closed the bedroom blinds; they looked out to the mountainsides and the river too. "It's not good."

Chu Wanning – his brave, beautiful Chu Wanning – closed his eyes, sighed, and opened them. "What is it?"

Not knowing how to put what had happened into words, Mo Ran handed him his unlocked phone, open to Hua Binan's messages.

Mo Ran watched him frown in confusion and then scroll up. And then he saw the blood drain from his face.

He gave him time to read it through. Chu Wanning did so twice. Then he put the phone on the bed between them, and flicked it awake with a shaking hand.

"Are you okay?" he asked idiotically.

"Mn." Chu Wanning waved his hand and opened his mouth. A noise emerged.

Mo Ran moved the phone away and shoved himself across the distance between them. He wrapped his arms around Chu Wanning, but it wasn't enough; he wanted to bring him entirely into his chest, into his heart, to hide him from sight, to surround every inch of vulnerable skin and protect him from the world.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Nn. Nn. Nn-o. Good," Chu Wanning forced out, the best, bravest man in the world. He was shaking, vibrating against Mo Ran's flesh, sending shockwaves through his muscles.

"You're good?"

"*Angry*." Chu Wanning made a noise of impatience and pushed Mo Ran away. He mimed drinking, and Mo Ran suspected it was to give himself time to speak again, rather than actual thirst.

"Right – yes, sure. It's time for the next antibiotics dose anyway," Mo Ran said, and winced when Chu Wanning sent him a darting look of fury.

Chu Wanning read and reread the messages as he drank the hot water and swallowed his pills. Mo Ran wordlessly offered him painkillers as well, and wasn't surprised when he refused them.

"*You* did good," Chu Wanning finally said slowly. "Did well. He wanted you. To go down."

“That’s what I thought,” Mo Ran said, sinking into the other chair. “Trying to make me too angry to think.”

“Mn. … I did.” The whispered confession. “Call him A-Nan.”

Mo Ran sat at Chu Wanning’s back and hugged him from behind. “Another sacrifice you’ve made for me. I imagine that was worse than the nails in the shoulder.”

Chu Wanning exhaled in amusement and relief, and gave him such a look of gratitude over his shoulder that Mo Ran thought he was going to start needing beta blockers too. “Mn. Only once though. Five nails.”

“Still. You had to think about it.”

“Mn. Did well, Mo Ran.”

Mo Ran pouted. “Not A-Ran?” he said with exaggerated piteousness, and forced a laugh at Chu Wanning’s incredulous huff. “No. *Never* call me A-Ran.”

“I had no intention,” Chu Wanning said, and took another sip of water. The words seemed to be coming slightly more easily again. “… did you watch?”

Mo Ran didn’t need to ask for clarification. “Only a few seconds of the first one. Until I realised what it was. Look, the others haven’t loaded at all.”

“En. I trust you.” Chu Wanning was staring at the surface of the table. “Um. What was…?”

“I think it was the candlestick,” Mo Ran whispered, as delicately as he could, but the noise in the back of Chu Wanning’s throat made him feel like the fucking thing was lodged in his own

trachea instead. “Wanning. You don’t have to look at me. But… No shame, remember? It’s all his. Don’t think of it as a candlestick. It’s a weapon. Like a knife, yeah? You were stabbed. You were hurt. That’s why he sent it, to make me angry that you were hurt, and I couldn’t protect you. Okay?”

Chu Wanning’s chin trembled, once, and then he nodded. He tucked his wet hair behind his ears with shaking hands, and stood up. “Need your phone.”

“Of course. What for?”

“Light,” Chu Wanning said, and turned on the torch.

“Okay, sure. Um. Why?”

Chu Wanning looked at the front door, then the balcony, and then positioned himself across from the wall of bookshelves. His face was twisted with rage, but after a moment of work, his voice was flat.

“He’s put a camera in here.”

“What – a camera? Wanning, a camera?!”

“How could he see you on the balcony and touching the door latch at the same time?” Chu Wanning ground out. “While also waiting at the front? Balcony faces west. Front door and building front face east. Must have been when I had the bag on. On me. Placing the camera, I mean.”

A camera – a fucking camera! Of course; Hua Binan had shown how much he fucking loved cameras, after all! What he seen? What had he heard? The gorge rose in Mo Ran’s throat; he swallowed the bile with difficulty.

Chu Wanning stopped moving the torch. “There. Between *Call to Arms* and *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*. Lu Xun. Lu Xun shelf. No, up one. I’ll get it.” He gave up on waiting for Mo Ran to remember the fundamentals of 20th century literature and went to the bookcase himself, pulled out the small battery pack, and pointed out the lens the torch-light had reflected off.

Mo Ran tried to keep himself from panicking. “We need to see if there’s any others.”

“Hm. I think I have what I need. An IR detector and an RF detector…” Chu Wanning knelt down with a grunt of pain and began to rummage through a tool box underneath his workbench. “Don’t turn that off! Leave it on.”

“Why?”

“Want to test my sensors after I’ve made them. Want to see if that one includes a microphone as well as a camera.”

Mo Ran turned it away to face the wall at least. He wanted to break it to pieces with his bare hands, in lieu of Hua Binan’s skull.

Chu Wanning was reaching up, tossing circuit parts and printed boards up onto the work surface. “Think I have an antenna somewhere here. But…. Mnnn. But if not, we’ve got plenty of copper wiring. I can make one. No, I *definitely* have… Infra-red first, that’s easy. I assume he bought infra-red cameras, or they’d be useless in the dark – where did I put the photoresistors?”

With every second that he rummaged, his words were coming more easily. Mo Ran thought it was probably because his mind was suddenly focused on circuits and electronics, rather than invasion, violation, terror.

“I know I have at least two TSSPs in here somewhere, because they come in a pack of three and I used one last year. Mo Ran, they’re like a little black box with three prongs coming out of the bottom.”

“Wait, wait, wait, *baobei*, slow down. Slow down. IR – that’s Infra-red?”

“Yes, to film something in the dark. I can attach an LED that’ll switch on if the photodiode detects any IR. I’ll need a different colour for the RF–”

“RF?”

“Radio Frequency – if it has a microphone.” He threw a soldering iron over his head. “Plug that in and switch it on. I can only find red LEDs – no, no, wait. Hm. It’d be just as quick to make two. Then you can get started with the IR while I find the antenna. *And* then we only need two LEDs. Doesn’t matter if they’re different colours. Over-complicating things, stupid! Is the soldering iron on?”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Mo Ran said. He navigated to the app store. “What do we need – an IR detector and an RF detector?”

“Yes. But if we buy it they won’t be here until tomorrow at the earliest. They’ll be ugly, but I can make them within an hour.”

“No need,” said Mo Ran, as he found the best-rated apps for the respective detectors and downloaded them. “Song Quitong was always so paranoid about hidden cameras. I told her about that girl you got expelled for putting the camera in our safety shower and she completely flipped out, insisted on checking my room every time we, um, like I was some kind of pervert…”

Chu Wanning slowly emerged from underneath the workbench. “… what?”

“Look. You can use your phone; you just download the software, and… Good idea to keep the first one on, look, it’s registering on the IR detector aaaaandddd… and it’s negative for the microphone detector. Do you have something that would set the RF detector off? Just to test that it works?”

Chu Wanning creaked upwards, unfurling himself from beneath the workbench. He wordlessly pressed a button on something attached to his PC. Mo Ran's phone blared to life.

The sudden silence was sucking the air from Mo Ran's lungs. The atmosphere in the little flat had changed. He looked at Chu Wanning, now staring at the abandoned box of circuit parts, and realised what he'd just done.

He'd pulled up the anchor keeping Chu Wanning from coming adrift.

He stepped closer to the computer and waved his phone around. "It's going to take a million years to scan the whole flat. If I use the IR detector on the phone to see if there's another camera, can you make the RF detector? Is there any way to amplify the signal or whatever? Or is that just a sci-fi thing?"

"No," Chu Wanning said. He was glaring, studying Mo Ran's face for any sign that he was being humoured.

Mo Ran kept his expression as innocently earnest as possible. He wasn't humouring Chu Wanning, not really – not *entirely* – they didn't have time for that. It really would take hours to scan the whole flat for microphones, and he had no doubt whatsoever that Chu Wanning could knock out a better circuit than an app could wrangle from a phone.

"I can use a better antenna, and add transistors," Chu Wanning said, apparently satisfied in judging Mo Ran's sincerity. "They'll make the circuit capable of picking up RF signals from further away…"

While Chu Wanning began soldering the RF detector, Mo Ran switched off the original camera and got to work. He found a second camera hidden on top of Chu Wanning's fridge, between some expensive bottles of baijiu that clearly hadn't been opened for years. It took more than an hour until he was satisfied, but a least he could be sure that there were no cameras in the bedroom or bathroom.

By then, Chu Wanning's microphone detector was ready to go. They tested it using his computer again, and its LED flashed to light up to five feet away. It took as much time for Mo Ran to check the entire flat again as it did for Chu Wanning to take apart the cameras and confirm that there were no microphones in either, i.e., barely any time at all.

"No microphones," Mo Ran said, collapsing into his chair at the table in relief and exhaustion. "That's what I was really worried about."

"Mm. I didn't think there would be," Chu Wanning said. He was staring at the surface of the table again, a line of thought in between his eyebrows. "In one of the messages he said that he heard *about* your confessions. I presume from Mu Yanli. If there was a microphone in here, he'd have heard you speaking to your uncle."

"Why wouldn't he leave bugs too, if he was going to bother with cameras?"

"Easier to detect. And he didn't think I'd ever be back here," Chu Wanning said tonelessly. "I imagine he left the cameras to see when you came back, what you did, whether there was any police investigation of the crime scene here…"

"Crime scene. Shit. I never… When we came back here, this place should have been all taped off, right? If Mu Yanli…"

"If Mu Yanli was really investigating my murder. Yes. Another point we'll make when we have to."

Mo Ran looked at him. "*When* we have to?"

"Mn. The deal's off," Chu Wanning said. "'While both of us are free and unharmed,' is what I told Mu Yanli. But I think she's lost her grip on her brother. I'm not surprised he tried this today. First thing this morning, he finds out that all the BBS compensation he was working on is never going to materialise. He said that he… That that was his *raison d'être*."

“His what?”

“His life’s purpose. That was what motivated everything he’s done for the last ten years. That, and revenge on his father.”

“What about you?” Mo Ran asked softly.

Chu Wanning looked up at him and shook his head. “I was… He said I was his reward. For accomplishing his goals. When his labours were complete.” He shivered and leant back in his seat. “But now that’s all been undone. Even if he had any money left, he couldn’t hire his criminal friends again, with all of them dead or in custody. He’s left alone, with nothing. I think killing you is the last thing he thinks he can achieve.”

“I was assuming they gave him a gun. From what you said he won’t leave it to chance, and to use a needle he’d have to get too close.”

“I think you’re right. Hope for the best but prepare for the worst. We need to escape without him seeing us.”

“Well, the front door’s out,” Mo Ran said.

“I thought you’d read some of my wuxia books?” Chu Wanning said. “We’ll use qinggong, obviously.”

Chapter 82: Qinggong

Chapter Notes

> I'm so sorry this took so long. Last chapter I said I hoped that 2025 would be kind, and instead January brought a sudden bereavement and my father's cancer surgery. I know that you'd all be very kind in the comments about this, but I'd rather not talk about it - I will take your kindness for granted, lol! 💖💖💖 Instead, I will be distracted by fic and escape a little!

While Chu Wanning dug out a rucksack for each of them – they were going to need their hands free, after all – Mo Ran texted Xue Meng to tell him not to come to the building under any circumstances. Then he explained briefly why, knowing that Xue Meng was probably already on his way to the car.

Chu Wanning took the lighter silk rucksack he used for hiking, and handed Mo Ran a dark canvas one, marked with dust, and embroidered with a shield of gold with red and blue chevrons on it.

“My College, in Oxford,” he said, answering Mo Ran’s quizzical look. “I was invited back for some of the events for their 750th anniversary. They call it *stash* – any merchandise with your College crest on it. I know it’s ridiculous, but when you’re Chinese, it’s a handy short-cut. Otherwise all the porters try to tell you the College is closed to tourists, or people assume you can’t speak English…”

Another piece of armour, Mo Ran thought. He brushed the dust off carefully.

They quickly packed some essentials. More specifically, Mo Ran did, as Chu Wanning’s understanding of ‘essentials’ was apparently downloading all of the Rufeng evidence onto his tablet, rather than medications or toothbrushes or clothes.

It made Mo Ran feel obscurely proud. This, he could do. This, he could do *well* – he could support and protect, and there was reason for him to be in the world, if he could do this for someone so good, someone that he loved so much.

It made him feel strangely content, strangely *pure*, and it was as he was sorting out the medications that he realised why. He had done this for his mother, when he was still a good person.

Her death had strangled or smothered that best part of him, his desire to enfold and protect and nurture; his fleeting interaction with Chu Wanning in Linyi had staved off his rage for a time, but it had been too brief to hold out for so long against so much pain. But now he could feel it again: a tiny tendril of calmness in his heart, slowly and carefully reaching for the light, reaching through the thick vines and thorns which had choked it for so long.

“I keep wondering where my phone is,” Chu Wanning said as he came into the bedroom. “But he took it. I wiped it from the computer remotely, so that should be all right.”

He was carrying something bulky and heavy, angling his body to hide it. Mo Ran only saw a shape wrapped in plastic before it was shoved into Chu Wanning's rucksack, but that was enough to let him know what it was. Feeling sick, he pretended not to have seen it.

“He’ll never guess your PIN,” Mo Ran said with unshakeable confidence. How could someone know Chu Wanning’s PIN, his longing for the stars and his carefully poetic understanding of the universe, and want to hurt him?

“No – he was never…” Something cracked in Chu Wanning’s mask, and he looked away sharply. “We need to go.”

“Your hair’s still damp, you’ll freeze.”

“It’s getting dark. It’ll be ten times more dangerous if we can’t see the ice.”

Mo Ran sighed. Chu Wanning was right. “All right. But at least–” He pulled out a brown paper bag from the rucksack and tore it open. Then he pulled the white hat down over Chu Wanning’s ears, and began to wind the white scarf around his neck.

His fingers brushed a rougher line of skin on the side of Chu Wanning's throat, and he remembered another long stretch of white, winding around that slim neck. "Shit. Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't- I didn't think–"

"Think what?" Chu Wanning's eyes were very wide, but he took the scarf from Mo ran's hands and tucked the ends into his coat. "It's… Linyi, isn't it?"

"I forgot – I don't know *how* I forgot, but- I bought it for you in the Christmas market, but I didn't think about Rufeng–"

"Oh, *that*. Don't be so silly, Mo Ran," Chu Wanning said softly. "I meant, Linyi before, when we were… It's lovely. I was thinking that I should buy a scarf to hide the line, but this… Hm. It's nice."

Mo Ran sighed again, and couldn't help but put his arms around Chu Wanning. "Not as nice as the one you gave me. Right, okay. Let's do this."

He made Chu Wanning go up the ladder first in case he slipped, and almost managed to be a gentleman vis-à-vis the view. The trapdoor onto the roof squealed as it opened, and a tangible block of freezing air sank through it.

They kept low, relying on the low wall around the flat roof to hide them from any witnesses. Chu Wanning, ever-prepared, had a fire escape rope ladder which could be secured to his balcony, but they were still unsure as to whether Hua Binan had a camera directed at it.

Six roofs stretched before them. There was a guesthouse two doors down from Chu Wanning's building, and they agreed that on the balance of probabilities, Hua Binan was staying there – with five storeys to climb down, he would have more than enough time to beat them to the ground and shoot them. The sixth was a rooftop garden, closed for the winter, which belonged to Potalaka, a Tibetan restaurant where Chu Wanning sometimes went for yak stew, Sanga Bhaley with extra powdered sugar, and hot chhaang.

The first two roofs were both flat. Not a problem. After that, it would become difficult.

Mo Ran, in a rare moment of tact, said nothing about Chu Wanning's track record of trying to jump off roofs.

The first two roofs – another block of flats and the guesthouse – were flat and flush to each other, but the freezing weather had turned them into ice rinks. They abandoned their dignity (Mo Ran far more readily than Chu Wanning) and went on their hands and knees, which both prevented them from falling and kept them hidden behind the roofs' low walls.

Still, even if it wasn't as dangerous, it was bitterly cold, and hard work. Chu Wanning, still in pain, was paper-faced by the beginning of the third roof, though, of course, he didn't offer a single syllable of complaint.

"There's a drop here," Mo Ran said softly, and judged the distance. About nine feet, three if he hung from the wall… It didn't sound like a lot, but the problem wasn't in the distance, but the destination: an icy sloped roof. He hung by his arms, something he knew that Chu Wanning would have trouble with, and lowered himself down onto the tiles. There was a gentle incline on either side, but if they went hand in hand and balanced each other… "Okay, I'll catch you."

This was the first time that Chu Wanning had hesitated. But it was only for a moment; he took a single deep breath, then gripped the roof-wall with his right hand, and hung for a second before dropping.

Mo Ran caught him easily and held him tight against the wall while he found his footing. The jolt of being caught had made him tighten his jaw against the pain, but he nodded after a second.

"Okay. We'll hold both hands over the middle bit–"

"The apex."

“The apex, cool, right. Crouch low–”

“I know what a centre of balance is, Mo Ran!”

“I know, Shizun, I know.” Mo Ran smiled; the position had to be painful for Chu Wanning, but drawing attention to that would be far more painful for him. “Okay. Like crabs…”

Neither slipped, but it took another ten minutes just to clear the roof. Ten more for the next one. By now they were both shivering, and they paused before the fifth roof to chafe life back into their hands.

Chu Wanning’s teeth were chattering. “Un-unblock him. S-see if he’s s-sent anything.”

“Good idea. No, nothing. Shit…”

The next roof looked like a flat one, but it was half a storey up. Mo Ran thought that he could probably pull himself up, but Chu Wanning was shorter, and wouldn’t be able to use his left arm…

“Okay,” he said, and did *not* look down. “I’ll give you a leg-up, and then push you from beneath. Do you think you can do it with one arm?”

“What about you? You’ll s-slip.”

“I’m fine, no worries,” Mo Ran said. “We’ll just be quick about it, okay?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “What about… You go up first. Do you think you’d be able to lift me after you?”

“Yeah, no problem…” There *was* a problem, but it was Mo Ran’s reluctance to leave Chu Wanning on the sloped roof alone. But it would be safer than trying to balance and lift him from below.

He could just about reach the ledge. However, his cold hands couldn’t get a grip.

“Mo Ran,” Chu Wanning said, and lowered himself onto his hands and knees.

“No!”

“Just hurry up, for heaven’s sake, it’s cold!”

“I’m not stepping on your fucking back!” He nearly said that he knew what it looked like, and caught himself just in time.

Chu Wanning sighed, as though Mo Ran was the one being completely unreasonable, and lifted one knee instead, bracing himself on the wall. “Will that give you enough lift?”

He didn’t argue; they were wasting time. Hating himself and hating Hua Binan, and then hating himself *again* because he knew the image of Chu Wanning voluntarily making himself into Mo Ran’s footstool was now seared into his brain for all time, Mo Ran stepped onto Chu Wanning’s knee and pulled himself up onto the next roof as quickly as he could.

This final roof was, thankfully, a flat one. Mo Ran braced himself against its low wall, reached down, and pulled Chu Wanning up.

By now dusk had turned to night, and Mo Ran felt freezing cold and totally exhausted. Chu Wanning had to be feeling even worse. But it was Mo Ran who felt as though he could cry when they reached the end of the final roof and saw their destination.

Potalaka did indeed have a roof garden. It was on a level with the roof that they currently stood on.

But neither of them had realised that there was a gap between the two roofs. It was less than five feet, but with a drop of five storeys, it was a chasm.

The low wall meant that they couldn't take it at a run, if running was even possible on the ice of the flat roof. Arms aching, legs aching, shoulders aching, they would have to go back. They were going to have to retrace their steps across five roofs, in the dark and bitter cold, already shattered, to regroup there and try to find another escape plan. *Shit*, they'd been able to drop three feet onto the tiles, but how the hell were they going to be able to-

Chu Wanning stepped up onto the wall and leapt.

Mo Ran had the strangest sensation of time slowing to a crawl, and then speeding up again when Chu Wanning reached the other roof; he felt the impact in his own bones when Chu Wanning landed and rolled forward on his right shoulder.

He stood up in the small gap between tables and snow-touched potted plants, and brushed himself off. There was a dark smudge on the white scarf around his neck.

Mo Ran's heart remembered to beat again, and the sudden surge of blood made his head feel like it was about to explode. "What the *fuck*, Wanning?!"

"What?"

"You can't just- what the fuck were you thinking?!"

Chu Wanning raised an eyebrow. "I was thinking that it's cold and I want to go inside."

"You could have died!"

“We both could have died several times today. I might not be a good judge of people,” Chu Wanning said, “but I’d be a pretty shoddy engineer if I couldn’t judge distances.” He cocked his head to the side. “Do you not want to jump it?”

“No, I don’t fucking want to jump it!”

“Oh,” Chu Wanning said in realisation, and his expression softened. “Okay, well, there’s some planks over there, I’ll balance them across.”

“No! I –”

“Then *what*? Mo Ran, it’s dark. It’s freezing. We’re both shivering. It’s taken us over an hour to get this far. Going back along the sloped roofs will be dangerous enough, but how are we going to scale a nine foot wall?” Chu Wanning crossed his arms, and a stubborn look settled on his face. “I’m not going back. You can if you want.”

Mo Ran didn’t understand why he was suddenly the asshole here. He looked down at the drop between the buildings and felt dizzy.

Then he looked back at Chu Wanning. He wasn’t shivering; he was shaking. His lips were blue.

“I’ll get the planks. I can hold them steady for you.”

Was it not that Chu Wanning *wouldn’t* go back, but that he *couldn’t?*

For fuck’s sake. Mo Ran honestly thought he’d rather take his chances with Hua Binan and a gun than a potential five storey drop. Fucking Hua Binan, fucking Chu Wanning, and fucking *qinggong*.

As Chu Wanning turned around to find the materials for a makeshift bridge of some kind, Mo Ran threw out a prayer to the gods he didn't believe in, stepped onto the ledge, and jumped.

He landed awkwardly, not knowing how to drop and roll like Chu Wanning had done. His left ankle groaned in pain, and he scraped the heel of his palm on the tiles of the roof garden. But as he staggered upright, all of his fear and anger had disappeared in a glorious wave of adrenaline-fueled smugness and childish glee.

He'd done it. He'd done it! He really was like a hero in a wuxia drama, leaping from roof to roof. He bet he'd looked fucking *majestic* doing it too.

With a strangled whoop of victory he crushed Chu Wanning into a hug, and then leant his weight on him as his knees started knocking in earnest.

"How are you so calm?" he hissed.

"I was worried just then," Chu Wanning said. His fingertips were a constellation of pressure on Mo Ran's back, even through his winter clothes. "Seeing *you* jump. It's one thing to rely on yourself…"

They were both so fucking stupid, Mo Ran thought, and kissed him.

He felt Chu Wanning freeze and suddenly realised what he'd done. Every time, *every damn time*, he swore he was going to be respectful and take things slow, and then Chu Wanning would look beautiful or say something adorable or be in mortal danger and all conscious thought and sense and restraint would fly out of the window or over the roof ledge and splat on the street below.

And then, every time, Chu Wanning would accept him with open arms and open lips and bloom for him.

Chu Wanning exhaled a sigh into Mo Ran's mouth and arched against him. Mo Ran had been terrified that this would make Chu Wanning remember Hua Binan, but instead he was relaxing in his arms as though some fear had been put to rest instead.

"Your lips are cold," he murmured, and Mo Ran laughed.

"Let's get inside, and then I can think of a way to warm them up."

"The door's over here," Chu Wanning said, and as he indicated it they heard the rattle of a padlock.

The man who emerged was elderly, but he looked like he knew how to use the crowbar in his hand and was looking forward to the opportunity. Mo Ran shoved Chu Wanning behind him and held up his hand. "Wait, wait–"

"Rabten gen-la," Chu Wanning said, pushing Mo Ran to the side and taking off his hat. "Mo Ran, be polite, take off your hat."

The man lowered the crowbar. "Professor Chu? What are you doing on my roof?"

Rabten, the owner of Potalaka, allowed them inside, and explained that he'd heard the noise of someone landing on the roof. Chu Wanning gave him a quick precis of the situation, saying that they were trying to avoid someone unpleasant waiting for them outside his flat.

Rabten raised an eyebrow. "He'd have to be pretty unpleasant for you to prefer this route. Is he one of the journalists? They've been in all month asking about you – from Chengdu, even from Beijing."

"Probably more nefarious than a journalist," Chu Wanning said. "But he has links with a corrupt officer, so I didn't want to call the police."

“No, no.” Rabten held up the little finger of his left hand and mimed spitting. “Corrupt police, bah. No, very wise.”

“I apologise for causing you trouble, Rabten gen-la.”

“What trouble? They all bought food and drink before beginning their questions. Business has been excellent.” Rabten grinned at him. “I said what I always say about you, Professor Chu. Tongue like a knife and a heart like tofu. And that you have a sweet tooth, and can’t handle spice. Journalists, nearly as bad as police. They’ve been saying for years that you’re a villain, and now suddenly they all knew you were being maligned, they all knew all along, of course.”

“You may tell them I’m a burglar now, give them something to write about while they drink some chhaang,” Chu Wanning said, managing a smile with what Mo Ran could see was a great deal of effort. “Or that you saved us from a real villain.”

“The latter, the latter. Ah, you both gave me a fright. Hearing those thumps was one thing, but the thought of you on those roofs, in this weather… You should have called ahead!”

Chu Wanning blinked. “I… I don’t have a phone. I’m sorry, I should have thought. It’s been a rather trying time. I’m sorry to have scared you.”

“It’s all right. Will you stay for tea? You both look frozen.”

“Thank you, but we’d better go,” Mo Ran said. “My uncle lives up the hill, so it’d going to take us another hour to walk up, and it’s already dark.”

Chu Wanning might have been above such gaucheties as name-dropping, but Mo Ran was wasn’t. Wuchang was right on the border with the Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and nearly a quarter of its population was Tibetan. When the town’s small monastery was destroyed in the 2008 earthquake, the central government had been slow to release funds for its rebuilding; Xue Zhengyong had sped up the process, and made a significant donation as well.

“Up the hill – Mayor Xue? He’s your uncle?” Rabten said. “You can’t walk – imagine if you fell and died? Professor Chu and Mayor Xue’s nephew; no, don’t be silly. My daughter will drive you. Give me two minutes, let me make a box of Sanga Bhaley for you to bring with you – you give it to your uncle for me.”

Rabten left the room to call his daughter. Now that the two heroes of the jianghu were safely inside again, Chu Wanning looked exhausted. “You are *shameless*,” he whispered, and Mo Ran pecked his icy cheek.

Chapter 83: All In

Chapter Notes

> Hello all! Thank you for your patience, and for your well wishes - my father's surgery went well. As I said last time, I would really rather not talk about it - my father has always been far more of a Huaizui than a Xue Zhengyong - and I know how kind you all are! Let's talk about the fic, and Chu Wanning having a total normal one, instead. XD 💖

The hour's walk up the hill to the Xues' mansion was a ten minute drive. Mo Ran was in the front passenger seat, chatting to Rabten's daughter Odlha and making her laugh, but Chu Wanning could barely even gather the energy to be jealous. His blood pounded against his temples like they were twin courthouse drums and every cell in his body was taking its turn to petition for justice.

He had to think clearly. This day – this never-ending day – was shaping up to be one on which the war could turn. Hua Binan's control was failing him; too much pressure had been placed on it in the last decade, and the rage he had tried to keep on a tight lead was breaking free.

Chu Wanning had always had a fiery temper, but Hua Binan's rage was different. Chu Wanning's anger was like lightning, swift and blazing and precise, but Hua Binan's was a flood, indiscriminate, inexorable. It had been dammed up behind his polite smile and subservient manners, but the dam was cracking. One of those cracks had been his strange, bewildering, incomprehensible obsession with Chu Wanning, and the pressure of that escaping rage had created a cruelty that had pierced his body and his soul.

The cracks would widen. Mo Ran was another, connected, of course. But there were other cracks, and if Chu Wanning could turn them into a web…

But then what would happen? Who of them would be swept away, when the dam of Hua Binan's control finally, fully, broke?

Odlha's delivery truck was swerving up the winding mountain road, taking the corners in the dark at a frankly dangerous speed. He tipped to the side, bracing himself against the door, and looked out into the darkness.

"Word to the wise, Dr. Chu. Throw up if you must, but the bag's not getting removed, so I'd advise against it. You do you, though."

His salivary glands felt like segments of a rotten tangerine, squeezed and squirting their watery acid into his mouth, and he was going to be sick, he was going to vomit-

They went over a pothole, and the shoddy suspension of the old truck nearly threw him out of the seat.

"Sorry, sorry!" Odhla chirped. "Nearly there! Oh, wow, look at this place!"

Xue Zhengyong reacted to the unexpected guest with his usual aplomb and the boisterous charm which had made him so popular in Wuchang, exclaiming over the Sangha Bhaley and giving Odhla a bottle of baijiu to bring back to her father, along with a promise to book the restaurant for a dinner when the next semester began. Xue Meng grabbed Mo Ran and immediately and loudly demanded a full explanation. This gave Chu Wanning the opportunity to slip through to the kitchen without being waylaid.

"Wanning!"

Wang Chuqing dropped the pot of fish maw soup she'd been preparing so abruptly that drops flew out across the table. She ran around the large kitchen island, making to take Chu Wanning's hands, and stopped herself just in time.

So Chu Wanning took hers instead.

She exhaled, and Chu Wanning thought he could see relief on her face. "You read my letter?"

Damn. He knew he'd forgotten something. He shook his head. "I'm sorry – we found some cameras, we had to escape over the roofs – we'll tell you all of it – but I forgot. I wanted to read it in a calm… I received a letter from Huaizui yesterday, he's dead, and so another letter–"

"No, no, of course, I understand! I'm so sorry. About Huaizui, or not, I don't know – I mean, that's what my letter said. I'm so sorry, Wanning."

"It's all right. I know why… We were none of us at our best that day."

Wang Chuqing sniffed and managed a laugh. "We certainly weren't… But you were right, and I was wrong."

"You were worried. And we were… It's all right, Chuqing. Please don't give it another thought." He sighed, and squeezed her hand. "I wouldn't have taken the risk of Hua Binan following us here, but I needed to ask you a favour."

"Anything."

"I won't hold you to that, without you hearing what it is. But before I ask… at Guyueye." He had no idea how to ask this question of Wang Chuqing. He needed to leave her some face, if her answer was in the affirmative. "And the reason you left. Did you ever… um, *see* anything that was like… Like what Hua Binan did…?"

Wang Chuqing drew a deep breath, but she answered immediately and firmly. "No. No, Wanning. Nothing like that. I left because of a personal disagreement, not a crime."

That still left plenty unsaid, but Chu Wanning had no intention of prying. Just as he was about to lay out his plan, Xue Meng came in, and Wang Chuqing immediately looked away to her son.

“She’s gone,” Xue Meng said. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Chu Wanning said. “Hungry. Let me help you carry this through, Chuqing, and Mo Ran can tell you what happened.”

Wang Chuqing had cooked several of Chu Wanning’s favourite dishes, and he ate as much and as quickly as he possibly could without throwing it up again. He’d felt nauseated since Mo Ran showed him Hua Binan’s messages, but he refused to think about them until he was alone, when he could remove his mask. If he even allowed himself to comprehend the implications of them, he thought that he would collapse and be good-for-nothing again, as he had been for the last week.

Xue Zhengyong looked like he was primed to be irritated by their attire and implicit disrespect of his wife’s effort, but quickly relaxed when Mo Ran told them about the cameras and the rooftop odyssey.

The tale ended, and Wang Chuqing noticed the unusual speed with which Chu Wanning was eating. “Are you going somewhere else afterwards?”

“We have to,” Chu Wanning said. He tried to rub the migraine from his temples, and finally allowed himself to abandon the meal. “I’m not sure where, yet. That depends on… The favour I needed to ask you.”

“Anything, Yuheng,” Xue Zhengyong promised.

“I’m afraid it’s a favour I need to ask of Chuqing,” he replied apologetically. Though it might be awkward for Xue Zhengyong as well… “Hm. Have you ever played chess – western chess?”

“I know which pieces go where,” Xue Zhengyong said, “but never at any real level.” Wang Chuqing also shook her head.

Chu Wanning hadn't really expected any affirmative answer from Xue Meng, but he thought that it would be polite to hide his assumption and look for a reply.

Mo Ran just grinned.

"Pretend we don't," Xue Zhengyong said.

"There's a tactic, called a zwischenzug. Instead of playing the expected move, like capturing a piece, you do something unexpected and unpredictable; you attack and produce an immediate threat for your opponent to take care of, and then make the expected move after they've been forced to deal with it, interrupting their continuation. *Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt*. In *weiqi* the equivalent is *tuo xian* – you know?"

"I mean, I follow," Xue Zhengyong said, dodging the question. "So what's the unpredictable move?"

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Chu Wanning said. "And Hua Binan has an enemy that he would never expect me to work with. An enemy whom I suspect would very much like to know who betrayed his company from the inside…"

He looked at Wang Chuqing, and Wang Chuqing exhaled.

"Ah… You want to talk to Jiang Xi."

"What, Guyueye? But you hate them!" Xue Meng exclaimed.

"Exactly," Mo Ran said. "That's the point. Working with them is the one thing he swore he'd never do, so Hua Binan won't expect it."

“Jiang Xi is a better CEO than Wan Jinhai,” Chu Wanning added with a grimace. “Not that that says much. But even if his reasons for wanting to keep the BBS pay-outs were entirely cynical, it shows he can sense which way the wind is blowing.”

Wang Chuqing nodded thoughtfully. “I need to talk to *laogong*,” she said, and confirmed Chu Wanning’s suspicions as to what their personal disagreement might have entailed.

He nodded. “I need to wash my hands anyway,” he said, grasping for the first excuse he could think of.

“No, we’ll step out –” Wang Chuqing began, but Chu Wanning was already gone.

His brain was on fire. He locked the door of the downstairs bathroom with trembling fingers.

While he’d used the analogy of chess, Chu Wanning actually preferred poker, its combination of quick calculation and cold nerve. Well. There was no point in gambling for small stakes. If Mo Ran’s life was on the table, Chu Wanning was all in.

No. *Any* innocent life. Even in the abstract, he thought, remembering his Shangqing Barrier, and everything that followed it.

With his reputation only just restored by what happened at Rufeng, it made him feel sick to his stomach to bet it all. Even if he won, everyone would think that he was a fickle sell-out, happy to cleave to Guyueye after everything they’d done.

But whatever happened, Hua Binan was going to release those videos, wasn’t he?

He felt the tell-tale warning of saliva flooding his mouth, and managed to get to his knees before he vomited.

So much for cold nerve.

To change his first intent and alter his course

Is a thing the noble man disdains.

I made my marking clear; I set my mind on the ink-line;

My former path I did not change.

He nearly leant his aching forehead on the toilet seat, but disgust won out; he let himself fall back onto the floor instead.

Chu Wanning looked up at the underside of the sink. He'd done it that first morning in Hua Binan's captivity, from this same angle, looking for a bolt or a piece of metal with which to…

To change his first intent and alter his course is a thing the noble man disdains. Chu Wanning was hardly a noble man to begin with, but he'd at least been steadfast in his principles. Mo Ran had tried to corrupt him, and it turned out that he had entirely succeeded. It was just that love had worked instead of lust.

He needed to watch the videos. He needed to know what people would see.

There was a knock on the bathroom door, and Chu Wanning's crown cracked against the sink.

"Baobei?"

"Yeah," Chu Wanning said, and hurriedly wiped his lips. "Yes, I mean. Sorry. One second. Go back to Xue Meng – um, look up Jiang Xi, see if you can find out where he is at the moment."

"… are you okay?"

“I’m fine! Leave me alone!”

He waited until he heard Mo Ran walk away before he scrambled up off the floor. He flushed the toilet, hating the sound of it, and scrubbed at his hands.

In the mirror, a clammy, white-faced stranger stared back at him.

Chu Wanning slapped himself, once, twice, three, four times, and watched the stranger’s cheeks bloom red.

“Pull yourself together, idiot. You pathetic, selfish coward. Pull yourself together,” he said, and it settled his stomach in a way that throwing up hadn’t.

*

Wang Chuqing and Xue Zhengyong came back into the dining room a few minutes after Chu Wanning did.

“I’ve called him,” she said, and Chu Wanning bowed his head. “He said that his plane will be at Chengdu Shuangliu for one hour at seven o’clock tomorrow morning; if you’re there by then, he can give you the journey to Beijing to talk.”

“How generous,” Chu Wanning said, and swallowed a mouthful of wine. “You didn’t tell him why I wanted to speak to him?”

“No; that’s the best card you have.”

“Precisely. I’m sorry to have brought all of this to your door again.”

“You didn’t, Yuheng. That Hua bastard did,” Xue Zhengyong said firmly. “But we’ll be gone by the time he realises you’ve fled the coop. We’ll go to Baidicheng.”

“I want to go with Chu-*laoshi*,” Xue Meng said.

“Absolutely not.” Chu Wanning would rather swallow glass. “You’ll be safer with your parents.”

“No,” Wang Chuqing said. It shocked the ghost out of him. “That’s my stipulation, Wanning.”

“You… *want* Xue Meng to go with us?”

“If he wants to go with you, then yes.” Wang Chuqing looked at her son. “If you really, *really* want to go and meet Jiang Xi.”

Xue Meng looked at his father, who nodded solemnly. He’d clearly not expected his demand to work. “Why? I mean, yes! I want to go with them, I want to help. But I don’t get…”

“Because you’re an adult,” Wang Chuqing said. “And you showed us a fortnight ago that you’d leave if you wanted to, with or without our permission. I’d feel better if you were with the others rather than alone, and I’m your mother, not your captor.”

With something a lot like anger and something a little like grief, Chu Wanning thought about Huaizui, his erstwhile gaoler. Huaizui, now a corpse.

No, not even that. A pile of ashes, scattered somewhere.

“But you will be polite to him!” Wang Chuqing was saying. “He’s a rude, difficult man, but if you are rude back to him, it will reflect poorly on your father and me. Our reputation will be

in your hands, Meng'er. Don't fall for any of his bait, be the most courteous you've ever been in your life!"

"Yes, yes, absolutely!" Xue Meng was nodding, not looking at all like the adult he was supposed to be. "You don't need to worry about a thing!"

Xue Zhengyong reached up and squeezed his wife's hand. "You mustn't do anything to worry your mother. We're trusting you, as an adult. Whatever Yuheng says, you must do it without question, understand?"

"Of course! I always do anyway," Xue Meng said, and Chu Wanning felt his intestines churn again.

They quickly brought the meal to a close; all of the Xues needed to pack, and Mo Ran said they should sleep before the drive. They'd need to set out at midnight to make the rendezvous, which gave them about three hours.

"I'll sleep in the car," Chu Wanning said. "I want to read more of this before the meeting. Make sure it's charged. You go to bed."

"I'll stay down with you," Mo Ran said, and Chu Wanning gave him a shove.

"I said, go to bed. You and Xue Meng will have to be the ones driving, and I have a lot of reading to get through."

Mo Ran looked like a kicked puppy, but he slunk towards the stairs.

"Wait," Chu Wanning said, and hated himself for the sudden hope in Mo Ran's eyes. "May I use your phone?"

“Sure,” Mo Ran said, unlocking it and passing it back. “Do you need to look something up…?”

“I want to phone Nangong Si,” Chu Wanning said. “The news broadcast this morning said that two of the Blue Sword Commandos were injured. I wondered whether they might have brought him with them, as the person most able to recognise them.”

“Shit, good thought. I can’t believe that was only this morning…”

Chu Wanning found Nangong Si’s number and dialled. As the phone rang, he reached up, and took Mo Ran’s hand.

“Sorry.”

“It’s all right. It’s been a hell of a long day,” Mo Ran said, laying a kiss of benediction on his head, coincidentally picking the exact spot he’d knocked against the sink.

“It’ll soon be over– A-Si. No, no, we’re fine. Yes, I’m *fine*. I don’t care what Mo Ran said, he’s prone to exaggeration, I really am fine. No, I was unconscious for most of it – I was phoning to ask if *you* were all right. I assumed they might ask you to go with the– Mn, yes, exactly, I thought you’d have the best chance of recognising them. I’m glad you’re all right. *Yes*, I’m fine – what did he *do*?” Chu Wanning glared up at Mo Ran, who looked around the room. “He didn’t *do* anything. Like I said, I was just stuck in a room. I was bored, that was all. No, of course I’m not– I have to go. I’m going.”

He hung up. “What the hell did you tell him?!”

“Nothing!” Mo Ran said. “Nothing about– I said that you were hurt, but not… Wanning, please come to bed.”

Chu Wanning shook his head. He had to stay focused; he had to keep the stitches in his soul whole until he could meet with Jiang Xi, and Mo Ran’s kindness would cut right through

them, tear him apart.

Mo Ran sighed, and held out his hand for his phone. “Okay. Okay, *baobei*. I’ll see you in a couple of hours…”

Chu Wanning didn’t relinquish it. “I need to…” He bit the inside of his cheek. “I need it for a while. You go up.”

“What for? I thought your tablet had the internet? What do you need– *no.*”

“I need to see what they are,” Chu Wanning said. “If my voice, or my face– I need to know if they’ll recognise me. He’ll release them, once he knows what we’re doing, anything to discredit me –”

“He *won’t* release them,” Mo Ran said, fingers twitching. “You have *no idea*– If anyone had videos like that of you, they’d never want any other soul to see a glimpse– you don’t –”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Trust me,” Mo Ran said, and knelt beside him. “Please. Please, *baobei*, trust me. I’m– I’m more like Hua Binan than anyone –”

“Of course you’re not! Don’t you dare say that!”

“I understand him more, I understand him better than you. Please. He won’t post them. I’m surprised he even sent them to me, I would *never*– But that was different. Because I’ve already… He won’t. And if he does, we’ll watch them, or I’ll let you, or I’ll watch them for you, whatever you want, whatever you need, but watching them now won’t stop him. It’s just… Just torturing yourself. Please, *please*, Wanning.”

“You don’t know what it’s like,” Chu Wanning said, and his treacherous voice broke. “I need to be– I can’t fall apart. I can’t let you let me.”

“Okay,” Mo Ran replied, as though he was making any sense at all, “but watching them now, you’re not going to be able to read afterwards, are you? Not going to be able to talk to Jiang Xi tomorrow. Just… Please come up with me. Read next to me, if that’s what you need to do. But please. Please don’t do this to yourself. Don’t do it to *me*. I can’t sleep without you next to me.”

Chu Wanning looked into Mo Ran’s eyes, as dark as the Ace of Spades, and folded.

Chapter 84: Hang Turtles and Fasten Fish

Chu Wanning did not come straight to bed. He said that he wanted to record a testimony, to leave with the wrapped candlestick in a safe at Zhu Ruoxuan's office, in case anything happened to them. For this, he wanted total privacy, and Mo Ran gave it to him.

But when he came up for their hour or two of snatched sleep, white-faced and shaking, he still tried to pull up documents on his tablet.

"That's fine," Mo Ran said, "but lie down with me while you read? So I know where you are…"

Chu Wanning had acquiesced, curling up against Mo Ran's side, and within thirty seconds the tablet fell from his fingers. Mo Ran had been waiting for it and caught it, putting it on the nightstand and turning down the lights with as little movement as possible.

He almost regretted it when his phone alarm woke them up, because Chu Wanning woke with such a gasp of pain and devastation that he had clearly been pulled out of a nightmare.

"It's okay, it's okay, we're at the Xue house," Mo Ran said, fumbling for the light switch.

"Mo Ran– you can't be here– I shouldn't, *mustn't* –"

"Mustn't what? Everything's fine, *baobei.* It was just a long day."

"Did I come in here?" Chu Wanning said, looking around with wide, horrified eyes. "I shouldn't–!"

Mo Ran realised that Chu Wanning had never been into his room at the Xues' house before. "You're here because I asked you to come in. Remember?"

Chu Wanning shook his head. “No, I… No. I remember…” He looked at him, and Mo Ran could see the sleep fading from his eyes, replaced by exhaustion. “You asked me…?”

In the past week, Mo Ran had learnt a new chapter in the Book of Chu Wanning: what it sounded like when he was asking for reassurance, rather than information. His pride in his new knowledge was overwhelmed by grief, however, because now he knew that he had been the subject of Chu Wanning’s nightmare. Hua Binan had betrayed him, kidnapped him, raped him and tortured him, and Chu Wanning’s nightmare was that Mo Ran didn’t love him.

“I did, and you were kind enough to come in with me,” he said, putting his arms around Chu Wanning and kissing his hair, his temple. “I love you. That’s why I asked. I can’t sleep without you near…”

Chu Wanning shivered, and collapsed into the embrace. “Mo Ran… I dreamt that you thought that I’d hurt him, that you hated me…”

“Never. Never, never, never. Even when *I* thought I did, I was obsessed with you. It’s always been you, Wanning. Only ever been you.”

*

It was refreshing, Chu Wanning thought as he looked up at the private 737, to feel disinterested anger, to judge Jiang Xi for such an ostentatious and ecocidal display of wealth.

It probably said something about his character, that unattractive self-righteousness, but right now it was low on his list of priorities. Instead, he revelled in it, as he would not normally allow himself to do, because it was a distraction from the bodyguard currently patting him down.

A man touching him, even over his clothes… It electrified his skin with revulsion and disgust.

Xue Meng was whinging about the security check as well, and Chu Wanning snapped at him to grow up, the man is just doing his job. He saw Mo Ran's look of concern and refused to indulge it.

The inside of the plane was decorated with the blindingly gleaming taste that Chu Wanning had seen a handful of times and despised. There were small vases in between some of the windows, each containing a spray of pollia.

"Well, well," said the man lounging in a racing green leather chair. "Finally I am able to meet our most dedicated and eloquent critic."

Jiang Xi was in his late forties but had the skin of a thirty year old. The only sign of his age was a dusting of grey at his temples, which lent him an air of worldly dignity. He wore an immaculate grey suit despite the early hour, with tortoiseshell cufflinks and a smaragdine silk tie embroidered with tiny gold flowers on the blade.

He was everything Chu Wanning might have expected the richest man in China to look like, save for one detail: he was smoking an electronic cigarette, the case more engraved tortoiseshell, and the miasma that wreathed him was sickly sweet even by Chu Wanning's standards.

Chu Wanning smiled. "Good morning," he said with icy politeness. "Thank you for agreeing to see me. May I introduce–"

"The tall one must be Mo Ran," Jiang Xi said. "I recognise him from the file the police gave me. But the short one?"

"I'm 180 centimetres!" Xue Meng snapped. *Never meet your heroes*, Chu Wanning thought.

"178," Jiang Xi assessed without skipping a beat.

“My student,” Chu Wanning said as though the exchange had not happened, and hoping that the reminder that Xue Meng’s behaviour reflected on him would suffice as a rebuke. “Xue Meng.”

“Ah.” The single syllable contained a very old distaste. “Xue Zhengyong’s son.”

“Yeah,” Xue Meng said. “And he’s–”

Chu Wanning cut him off with a sharp gesture. “And he sends his regards. Shall we speak? I don’t wish to take up too much of your valuable time.”

“Of course – please, sit,” Jiang Xi said, indicating the chair opposite. “You don’t mind if we talk in the air, do you? If you have to return to Chengdu for anything urgent I’ll have the other plane drop you back. It’s just that I have a lunch meeting in Beijing.”

Chu Wanning nearly thought the unthinkable: that this day could not get any worse. But of course, it could, and probably would. “That’s fine,” he replied, with a detachment he did not feel. They would be safer in Beijing than in Sichuan.

Once they landed, of course.

“Great,” Jiang Xi said, and motioned to one of his assistants, standing ready by the cockpit. “And your students…?”

“I’m not his student,” Mo Ran said. “But yes, we’re staying. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Oh, it’s very paltry. Thank you for putting up with it.” Jiang Xi smiled. “After take-off, let’s have some tea. I’m afraid my selection here is very limited, but there’s simply no point in stocking Da Hong Pao on a plane. The lower air pressure ruins the taste. A ten thousand dollar mistake, one never repeated. I could call for some Panda Dung Tea, if you’ve become used to it in Sichuan.”

Xue Meng was wrinkling his nose. “Panda Dung Tea?”

Chue Wanning found the seatbelt down the side of the sofa and tightened it across his lap. “Put your seatbelts on,” he said, ignoring Jiang Xi’s look of amusement. “It’s *grown* in panda dung. They only absorb about thirty percent of the nutrients from bamboo, and the rest goes into their faeces.”

“Or I have some red mark pu’er.”

The plane was moving into its taxi, and Chu Wanning felt the sharp spike of terror, the acidic nausea that followed it. “No,” he said, too quickly. “I don’t drink pu’er. Too bitter. Any green or white tea is fine, thank you.”

“Ah, I’m the same. Pu’er is too bitter for me. I keep it for guests. But for preference?”

“Longjing,” he ground out.

“Of course, you’re from Hangzhou, aren’t you?” Jiang Xi said. The plane began to gather speed. “Well. Presumably.”

“I’d murder for a coffee,” Mo Ran said.

This drew Jiang Xi’s attention just as the plane lifted off the runway, and allowed Chu Wanning to clench his fist behind his back. He loathed these games, these barbed politenesses and plausibly deniable rudenesses that made his head ache, while it was already spinning at the sensation of the plane’s take-off.

The plane steadied. The tea – and coffee – was served. Chu Wanning had to force himself to drink it, drop by agonising drop; they were fully at Jiang Xi’s mercy, there was no need for

him to drug them, he had no motive for doing so… But drinking tea that someone else had prepared made cold sweat run down his back.

"Sometimes you want something very straightforward to cleanse the palate." Jiang Xi meant *cheap*. The unfiltered morning sunlight glinted on the silver signet ring he wore, imprinting the engraving of a Xuanwu turtle on Chu Wanning's eyes.

Jiang Xi assessed Chu Wanning over the rim of his cup, and then his eyes drifted down to the rucksack at Mo Ran's feet. "Ah. You were at Merton?"

Mo Ran smiled back easily. "Merton – is that what it was called? Nah. I'd never had the money or the brains to go to Oxford."

Chu Wanning's ears burnt. "You know that it was me."

Jiang Xi smiled. "I would have been surprised, I must confess."

"Why would you be surprised?" Xue Meng said, surprising Chu Wanning a little with the vehemence of his defence.

"Oh, you know. All the Colleges have their own little stereotypes. Everyone knows that Merton is the most intellectual College. 'Where fun goes to die.' I suppose that's why you went there." Jiang Xi drew a breath from his tortoiseshell vape pen. "Because it's the academic powerhouse, I mean, of course. I hope you will permit me the medical observation that you are very pale. Are you a nervous flier?"

"Not at all," Chu Wanning lied. "I was in CNSA, after all."

"Of course. Then perhaps you've not entirely recovered from your ordeal?"

Chu Wanning placed his empty cup on the drinks rest and despised himself for the way that it clattered; the blood in his fingers had turned to icemelt. “My…” He glanced at Mo Ran, who looked as shocked as he felt. His tongue was swelling – perhaps the tea really was drugged? Had he developed an allergic reaction? What sources did Jiang Xi have – could it be that he was in league with Hua Binan? That he had known about and countenanced the ‘theft’? It made no sense, but how else – “How did you know…?”

Jiang Xi blinked at him. “How…? Everyone in China knows about it. It’s not every day a famous professor is filmed arguing with a terrorist.”

The breath he had been holding escaped his lungs like a vomiting of needles. Of course. Damn. Of course. “It was nothing.”

“It was certainly something. The police told me about the hanging.”

“Why?” Mo Ran asked sharply.

The exhalation had made Chu Wanning realise how tight his chest was. How much his throat hurt.

“I received a fuller dossier, as one of the victims.”

“One of the victims?!” Xue Meng shouted. “You weren’t even there!”

“Oh, *shut up*. Did you parents never teach you to be quiet when your elders are talking?”

“*We* never received any dossier,” Mo Ran added. “And we were the victims.”

“Don’t be naïve. I was the primary *financial* victim. What do you think matters more, in the real world?”

This had been a mistake. He was so stupid. Why had he thought that this would work? And now he was on a private plane, going on no sleep and no food, no idea where his medication was, about to have a panic attack in front of Jiang Xi, and he couldn't breathe – the noose was around his neck, the pressure was building in his forehead and his eyes were going to pop out of his skull, they were going to explode, he was certain the tea had been drugged –

"Enough."

Chu Wanning did not shout, but his voice cut through the escalating argument. He looked at Mo Ran and Xue Meng. "You two. Be silent or leave – I do not care which."

He looked back at Jiang Xi, who was smirking at Xue Meng. "And *you*. I'm not an idiot and I know what you're doing. I came here in good faith because I had received the impression that you were more intelligent and less immoral than your predecessor. But if you would like to continue playing your games and trying to antagonise or test me instead of having a sincere discussion, then I am perfectly content to spend the rest of this flight in silence."

Jiang Xi leant back in his chair. "Hm. I heard you had a temper." He inhaled a long breath from his e-cigarette, and sighed it out. "I wanted to see if it could be a liability."

Chu Wanning scoffed. "You said that you'd seen video of me arguing with an arrogant, provocatively cruel man. I don't know why you'd need to experience it yourself."

Jiang Xi's eyes widened a little at the insult. But like many arrogant men he respected the push-back, Chu Wanning thought, and his bluff played well.

"Then I apologise. I meant to provoke, but any cruelty was unintentional." Chu Wanning nodded, and Jiang Xi dismissed his assistants; they walked down the plane into what looked like a conference room, and shut the door behind them.

"Why are you here, Professor Chu?"

“You’ve tried to give both Guyueye’s money and then your own to the company’s victims. It made me think that, even if your motives are mercenary, we could work together.”

Jiang Xi raised an eyebrow. “To do what, precisely?”

“To save your company. I have information that is extremely valuable to you. Guyueye is haemorrhaging money in the stock market, but that is soon to be the least of your problems. Yesterday the Shadow Guard crime group was raided, and as we know, most of their money came from counterfeit medicines and narcotics. Once their supply is forensically tested, the police will know who supplied them with the drugs.”

“Who did?”

“You did,” Chu Wanning said. “Or, at least, your company did. All of the drugs were made with Guyueye machines and using Guyueye materials. The same person who installed Nangong Xu’s software – whom you have, I would guess, yet to identify – was also using Guyueye to fund the very people who stole from you.”

Jiang Xi’s aristocratic face was very pale, but he maintained his nonchalant expression. “This is hardly a dramatic revelation, Professor Chu. It was always a possibility, especially given Nangong Xu’s penchant for dramatic irony.”

“I know who did it,” Chu Wanning said. “And I’ll tell you. But in return, I need you to pretend that your investigators discovered it themselves. They need to create a plausible chain of events which identify him without revealing us as a source.”

“You don’t want to be seen to be helping Guyueye?”

“The man has a relative in the police, very high up. I can’t go directly to them. They have already tried to kill us more than once. I have information, and you have the resources to use it, while protecting us.”

Jiang Xi looked intrigued despite himself. He held up two fingers. “Two questions. How do you know? And why would he try to kill you – all of you?”

“He told me. As for… he wanted me to join him,” Chu Wanning said delicately. “He… was proud of himself. And he thought that I would be as well. I was not.”

The expression on Jiang Xi’s face reminded Chu Wanning that before this man was a CEO, he had been a doctor. “And how did he take that?”

“Not well.”

“He tried to kill you? When did this happen?”

“A little over two weeks ago. And no, he did not try to kill me. He tried to frame Mo Ran for my murder instead. I escaped on the 19th and managed to secure Mo Ran’s release. Do you have a pen and paper?”

Jiang Xi blinked in surprise, but he opened a small drawer in the panel beside him, and handed over a fountain pen (tortoiseshell) and a notebook of thick, creamy paper.

“His name is Hua Binan,” Chu Wanning said, writing down the characters. “His sister is Mu Yanli; I don’t know what branch of the police she is usually with. But they are the children of Mu Huohan, the judge that Nangong Xu murdered on the 3rd of November. Hua Binan was the son who witnessed his mother’s murder. He was also my first doctoral student, and a member of your pharmaceutical development team.”

Jiang Xi exhaled sharply as he took the piece of paper, and as unpractised at reading emotions as Chu Wanning was, the fury and loathing in his eyes were clear. “He’s the colleague… Of course. And he must have been the person that made Nangong Xu promise not to kill you?”

“Yes. I made a deal with his sister that if she released Mo Ran, then I wouldn’t go to police to tell them what he… What he had done. What they had done. But yesterday we found out that he had planted cameras in my flat, and he was waiting for us. We think he intended to kill us. Mo Ran and I escaped over the roofs, and went to my friends, the Xues – Mo Ran’s uncle and aunt.”

“But if you two were both in… *oh*.” Jiang Xi’s lip curled in visible disgust, and Chu Wanning felt a hot wave of shame and humiliation wash over him. “Is *that* why Hua Binan tried to kill… what do I even call him? Your paramour?”

“Whatever you like,” Mo Ran said, with a smile that showed his teeth, but he spoke at the exact moment that Xue Meng leapt up from his seat.

“So?! What if he is? What if they are? I can’t believe my mum even worked for you, you’re such a- such an *asshole!* You fucking *homophobe*–”

“Xue Meng!”

“Chu-*laoshi*, he called you ‘paramours’!”

“’Paramour’ is not a slur – sit down. It means ‘lover’, though the tone is less than friendly.” His heart was fluttering dangerously in his chest. The self-loathing was still there, but he had always suspected that Xue Meng disapproved of gay people and especially of his relationship with Mo Ran; such passionate anger on his behalf touched him deeply, even through the ice of fear and focus.

He waited until Xue Meng, reluctantly, sat down again, and looked back to Jiang Xi.

“Yes, we are together, Dr Jiang, if that’s what you're asking. Your feelings on the matter are irrelevant. They would be shared by most people. If I cared about your personal opinion I might be insulted, but I don’t, and am not. You have the names now, but they will go to ground the second that they realise that we have gone. You’ll never catch Hua Binan without us, and if you do not catch him, not only will public trust in Guyueye continue to plummet, but I suspect some in Government will be tempted to bring charges of criminal negligence

against you. But if you catch Hua Binan and hand him over, they have a figure of whom they can make an example, and are happy. Public faith in your company is restored. And all you have to do is cope with your discomfort for long enough to let us help you."

Jiang Xi listened to this with pursed lips, but it was Xue Meng to whom he addressed the first retort. "I am not a *homophobe*. All of… all of *this*. Pointless, distracting, messy *drama.* I don't care who sleeps with who, as long as *I* don't have to deal with the ridiculous repercussions of it."

"In this instance, if the situation were less *distracting* and *messy*, Hua Binan would already have fled the country," Chu Wanning said, privately, on some level, agreeing with Jiang Xi. "I promise you, if you think that this makes *you* uncomfortable… But he's losing control of himself. For ten years, everything he did was towards gaining compensation for BBS sufferers. Now that that's been ruined for him, getting revenge is the only possible bait we have to trap him."

"Hang on," Xue Meng said. "*Bait*? You can't!"

"His anger is what makes him lose control," Chu Wanning replied. "If we advertise somewhere that I will be – maybe a public meeting with Guyueye – we need to make him angry enough that he'll seek me out despite his better judgement and his sister trying to keep him calm."

Suddenly Mo Ran began to laugh.

Chu Wanning stared at him in astonishment; he had expected Mo Ran to object. But instead he was shaking with uproarious laughter – he dashed tears from his eyes, and at times the paroxysm grew so violent that he was silent.

The fit passed and Mo Ran caught his breath, wiping his cheeks. "Oh, *fuck*." He beamed at Chu Wanning, and his face was luminous, matched only by the depth of the shadows in his dimples. "We have to piss off Hua Binan?"

He was so beautiful, Chu Wanning thought in a daze – how could anyone be so beautiful? The blinding smile, the ultra-violet eyes sparkling with the aftermath of his laughter, the intoxicating expression of innocently wicked glee – how could that be directed at someone as broken and cold and ugly as Chu Wanning? What had Chu Wanning done in a past life to deserve such splendour and light and warmth?

Mo Ran took Chu Wanning's hand and squeezed it, the tangible manifestation of that warmth, and grinned at Jiang Xi.

"Dr. Jiang. I want to found a clinic dedicated to the treatment of Butterfly Bone Syndrome and research into a possible cure. I'm sure that Guyueye will want to publicly and vocally co-operate with this, even if you can't supply any funds. But you don't need to. I can commit 22 billion yuan, and I would like to name the clinic in memory of my mother."

Chapter 85: The Politeness of Princes

Apparently, he wouldn't even need to commit 22 billion yuan. A new, state-of-the-art hospital could be built for a billion, and a dedicated genetic research lab for less than that. It was the first time that Mo Ran had begun to realise just how much money he had in tangible, real terms. There was a gap in his knowledge between "monthly rent" and "stupid fucking numbers", but as Jiang Xi explained how a lump sum could be held in trust and just the *interest* used to pay the salaries of all the staff at his hypothetical clinic, he saw just how different they were in terms of their understanding and their mindsets.

"To those who have, more shall be given," Chu Wanning said quietly, staring at one of the pollia plants. His eyes were blank, his gaze far away. "To those who have not, even what they have shall be taken away."

"Confucius?" Mo Ran hazarded a guess.

"The Bible. Also the Law of Academic Funding."

"Exactly," Jiang Xi said. "Money makes money, and the smarter you are about it, the more money it'll make."

"Mo Ran doesn't want to make more money," Xue Meng said, glaring at Jiang Xi. "He wants to help people."

Jiang Xi rolled his eyes. "And money helps people, so more money helps more people."

"More money helps more people," Chu Wanning echoed dreamily, and Mo Ran looked at him sharply. Chu Wanning was rubbing the loose end of the seatbelt in between his finger and his thumb.

"Of course," Jiang Xi said languidly, "all of this is a moot discussion. Nothing more than in-flight entertainment. You don't have that kind of money."

“Why not?” Mo Ran said with a dangerous smile. “Don’t I look the part?”

“You don’t sound it. Anyone with that kind of money knows all of this already. And *I* know *everyone* in China who has that kind of money.”

“He only got it recently. Maybe you’re not as up-to-date as you think,” Xue Meng said.

Mo Ran matched his smirk. “We have Hua Binan to thank, actually. If he hadn’t asked Nangong Xu to lure Chu Wanning to Rufeng, I would never have been there, and I would never have realised that Nangong Liu was my father.”

Jiang Xi exhaled slowly. “I *see*. Well. Congratulations and commiserations.”

“On finding my father or losing him?” Mo Ran said.

Jiang Xi surprised him with a sudden grin. “Whichever you like, though I confess, if it were me, the commiserations would be for the former and the congratulations for the latter.”

Mo Ran raised his teacup in salutation. “Yeah, that’s my thinking.”

“Your mother was very clever. Playing the long game. If I'd slept around as much as Nangong Liu, I’d be very careful to keep track of any illegitimate children running around before I risked it all on dying without a will.”

Mo Ran’s smile twisted. “My mother was an innocent,” he said, very carefully trying to hide the rage that threatened to throttle him. “She told Nangong Liu about me, when we were living on the streets and she was dying of cancer. So he knew about me. But he also thought I died when I was fourteen, when the brothel I was living in burnt down. Thus the lack of will.”

The sentence hung in the air like a miasma. Jiang Xi nodded slightly in apology. “I see. Well then, if you are serious about this…”

“I am.”

“You said that you want to lure Hua Binan to where you are. How would you arrange a meeting?”

“I have his phone number,” Mo Ran said. “But… His sister’s high up in the police. If anything happens to him, she’ll immediately pin it on me.”

“So it has to be public,” Chu Wanning said. “As many witnesses as possible. Just like Rufeng…”

“Exactly. A coincidence, you know? Then anyone looking into it can’t say that we set him up.”

“So you’re essentially asking me to join a conspiracy to commit murder,” Jiang Xi said.

Shit. Phrased like that, Mo Ran thought, it didn’t sound great.

“Or to capture him, with the evidence in hand,” Chu Wanning said. “But if he is angry enough to show himself, I suspect he will be thinking more about revenge than self-preservation.”

“Oh, to be clear, I don’t mind,” Jiang Xi said. “Hua Binan will die. Whether it’s at the hands of my security detail or by execution for drug-trafficking is largely irrelevant to me. There are advantages and disadvantages to each option. But for the sake of appearances, we are aiming to capture Hua Binan and bring him to justice.”

“To neutralise him,” Chu Wanning said.

“A good word. Very well. *First, do no harm*, hm? What date is it… The 27th. It would be a quick turnaround, but every year I hold a New Year’s Eve party, on the 31st of December. Everyone goes home for the Lunar New Year, of course, and we have our Guyueye end-of-year parties before that.”

The end-of-year parties at Guyueye were legendary. Even Mo Ran had seen about them on the news. There were small ones scattered throughout the country, but last year Jiang Xi had booked G.E.M. to headline at the company headquarters party in Yangzhou, and while the usual raffle prizes of phones and tablets and cash were on the table, Guyueye also had top prizes of cars, and even a flat.

“Is four days enough time?”

“My people work fast.” Jiang Xi stood up. “I need to phone my government contact. This whole thing is dead in the water if they nix it. If they give us preliminary permission, do you have any financial advisors in Beijing?”

Mo Ran shook his head and spread his hands. “They’re in Shanghai…”

“No, that was just their Shanghai office. ICBC’s based in Beijing,” Xue Meng said.

“Unbelievable…” Jiang Xi said, rolling his eyes. “There’ll be someone assigned to your account. I have a dedicated advisor at ICBC as well, at least that makes things simpler, they can talk once we land.”

“Yeah, sure,” Mo Ran said.

“And if it doesn’t work out, well, you’re all invited to the party in any case. It’s on Slender West Lake in Yangzhou, we can travel together. I hold it there every year.” Jiang Xi looked down at their rucksacks. “I’m assuming you don’t have any hanfu in there, but that’s the dress code.”

“*Hanfu*?” Xue Meng said.

“Well, Five-Pavillion Bridge is Qing, so *qizhuang* is also acceptable. It’s a smaller event, mostly share-holders and top suite, only a few hundred, but any Guyueye staff in Yangzhou are invited to attend.”

“It sounds like a good option,” Chu Wanning said. “Thank you.”

“I’ll tell Wang Qingni to order some hanfu for you and to book a hotel suite for while we’re in Beijing. I do not allow guests to stay at my house,” said Jiang Xi, who then went to plane’s conference room to talk to his lackeys.

Chu Wanning blinked and inhaled deeply, before looking at Mo Ran. His face was pale. “That could have been worse. But are you sure about this?”

“Easiest decision I’ve ever made in my life,” Mo Ran said, without a second’s hesitation, and beamed in response to Chu Wanning’s stoic expression settling into something more genuine. “And not just because I keep imagining the look on Hua Binan’s face.”

“Mn. I must admit, the thought is not without…” Chu Wanning said, and he finally smiled.

“I got hard just thinking about it,” Mo Ran agreed, and laughed when Chu Wanning slapped his arm. “If you want to do something about it, we can join the Mile-High Club while Jiang Xi’s distracted…”

Chu Wanning blinked. “I don’t think the pilot is allowed to let us into the cockpit…”

“You’re so fucking gross!” Xue Meng shouted at the same time.

“You want to do it in the *cockpit*,” Mo Ran said lasciviously, ignoring his cousin. It was not a serious suggestion, or he wouldn’t have made it in front of Xue Meng. But the conversation had been hard, and playing the clown for Chu Wanning made the tension in his shoulders bleed out a little. “They don’t have the only joystick around…”

“Chu-*laoshi*, don’t listen to him, he’s being disgusting!”

“Is the Mile-High Club – is it not where you go into the cockpit?” Chu Wanning said, eliciting a delighted kiss from Mo Ran and a groan from Xue Meng.

“It’s where you do it in a plane!”

“And in a private plane, I bet Jiang Xi has a bed – we wouldn’t even have to do it in the toilet cubicle…” Mo Ran said.

Chu Wanning’s face turned white, and then red, and he smacked Mo Ran’s arm again, with significantly more force. “You are *shameless!*”

“I think you use ‘shameless’ when you actually think it’s a good idea,” Mo Ran teased, making Chu Wanning squawk. “But your maidenly modesty won’t let you say so.”

“’Maidenly modesty’ – Mo Ran, if this ridiculous machine doesn’t have a cold shower, I am perfectly happy to shut you in the storage hold until you freeze!”

Mo Ran sighed. “That’s the only thing that will cool my passion…”

“I’m going to kick you in the dick again,” Xue Meng said.

“I don’t know, I thought Jiang Xi was looking at you a lot…” Mo Ran winked. “He probably has *two* bedrooms.”

“Don’t be so perverse,” Chu Wanning said, but he was smiling despite the shadows under his eyes. “Don’t you have anything better to be thinking about?”

“Of course, I’m thinking about hanfu. Do you think Jiang Xi’s assistant would buy me one of those crowns with the beads?”

“You want to dress as an Emperor?”

“Why not?” Mo Ran edged closer along the sofa. “And you can be this venerable one’s beautiful Chu-*fei.*”

Xue Meng mimed vomiting over the arm of his chair.

Chu Wanning tried to look outraged, but the corner of his lip was quirking upwards. “Oh, so in this ridiculous, emasculating fantasy of yours, I’m not even the Empress?”

“Of course not! The Empress is always an evil bitch! No, you’re the beautiful and witty concubine that rises to the top. Like Zhen Huan in that drama this venerable one told you about.”

Chu Wanning crossed his arms and looked away, the perfect picture of a jealous consort. “The Emperor is usually a paranoid idiot as well.”

“Very true. This venerable one allows you to speak on state matters; my Chu-*fei* is so spoilt… But this venerable one should bestow an honorary name: my elegant and gentle Cabbage-*fei*.”

“Your Cabbage-*fei* is going to poison your bird’s nest soup.”

“So cruel! When this venerable one was planning to promote you to Cabbage-*guifei* after you give this venerable one an imperial heir!”

“I’m actually going to be sick,” said Xue Meng. “You are *actually* going to make me throw up.”

“Aiya, the Eighteenth Prince, returned from exile!” Mo Ran said. “I thought this venerable one banished you from this court forever after that sordid and *extremely public* incident with those two blond emissaries – oi!”

Chu Wanning watched the performative play-fight, head leant back on the sofa until the pilot announced that they were about to begin their descent, when he sat up and told them to behave. Jiang Xi remained in the conference room; presumably there were belted seats in there as well.

Mo Ran watched Chu Wanning as they landed. He’d not taken any medication in Chengdu, in case he was tired during the conversation with Jiang Xi, but Mo Ran almost thought he could feel his pulse through their joined hands.

Xue Meng spotted Chu Wanning’s death grip and opened his mouth, probably to ask something asinine like “Oh, so you *are* afraid of flying?” Mo Ran took advantage of Chu Wanning squeezing his eyes shut to shake his head vehemently as they landed, then drew his finger across his throat for good measure.

Mo Ran had never been to Beijing – Linyi was the furthest north he had ever been. The world below them was *bizarre*; used as he was to the low clouds and frequent rain and snow amid the Sichuan mountains, the sheer flatness of the city and the land around it made him feel strangely uneasy. The sky was perfectly clear and bright blue, and looked a thousand times wider and higher than Mo Ran had ever seen it.

It made him feel very small.

Chu Wanning still had his eyes closed, though of course, he’d lived in Beijing for his second doctorate at Tsinghua and his time at CNSA.

“I can’t get over how big the sky looks,” Mo Ran said to him. “It’s weirdly… scary?”

“Kenophobia,” Chu Wanning said carefully. “Fear of the void. Emptiness.” Then he added, “Horrible,” in agreement, and Mo Ran smiled down at him.

“Wuchang’s nicer. Cosier.”

“Beijing is… very dry,” Chu Wanning said. His voice was soft, and his words oddly halting. “I used to have nose bleeds. Bought a humidifier…”

Mo Ran laughed as the plane finished its taxi. “You *definitely* don’t need one of them in Sichuan. Oh my god, I bet they’ll have proper heating too, finally.”

“Is that why your flat was so cold yesterday? I thought I was going to freeze,” said Xue Meng as he unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up.

“You are such a spoilt bastard – that was with the oil radiators on full blast!” Mo Ran said. The buckle of Chu Wanning’s seatbelt knocked his hand as it was thrown off.

“No fan heaters…” Chu Wanning said as he stood up. Then, without any further sound, his eyes rolled back and his legs folded.

“Shit!” Mo Ran managed to catch him before his head knocked against the edge of the table, but it tipped back, baring his white throat. “Go get Jiang Xi!”

Xue Meng raced in what was the only possible direction to reach the conference room as Mo Ran lifted Chu Wanning onto the sofa, resting his head on the arm. “Wanning? Wanning, can you hear me?”

He was breathing, but his face was white and his skin damp. His heart, Mo Ran thought, was it his heart? How did you take a pulse? He pulled the sleeve of Chu Wanning's jumper up to find his wrist – inside of the wrist, that's what they did on television.

" – and he fainted, he's in here, you have to help him!"

Jiang Xi pushed Xue Meng to the side and *tutted*. "Idiots." He went to the sofa, grabbed Chu Wanning's ankles, and yanked his supine body down the sofa so that his head fell off the armrest.

"Hey!"

"You, make yourself useful, hold his legs up," Jiang Xi said. "No, higher! Higher than his head. Good. And you, you don't have a clue what you're doing."

Mo Ran's body moved to shield Chu Wanning. It was stupid. He *knew* it was stupid. Jiang Xi was a doctor.

But Chu Wanning was vulnerable.

And Hua Binan was a doctor.

Jiang Xi raised his eyebrows. "You'll trust me with 22 billion yuan without a thought, but not with him?"

"I don't care about 22 billion yuan."

It took another second of pure willpower before he was finally able to force his locked limbs to obey him, and Jiang Xi was able to lean over Chu Wanning. "Why were you feeling for his pulse? He's clearly breathing."

“He has arterial fibullation,” Mo Ran said.

“Atrial fibrillation – hm, yes, he’s in afib,” Jiang Xi confirmed. “Heart disease? Coronary artery disease?”

“No, he said it’s from physical damage, from when his dad stabbed him when he was fifteen.”

“From when *what?!*” Xue Meng wailed.

“Keep his legs up. It’s probably just syncopy. When did he last eat a proper meal?”

“Last night,” said Xue Meng.

Mo Ran shook his head. “I think he threw it up, while your mum was calling… Day before yesterday, then. No, wait, that was the day the letter arrived. It might be before that.”

“For heaven’s sake! Wang Chuqing didn’t just send me idiots, she sent me three different flavours! And he’s been taking medication?”

“Propranolol and antibiotics.”

“Has he taken any propranolol today? Any other beta blockers?”

“No. Don’t think so.”

“Why the hell not? Is he stupid or suicidal?”

“Because he was worried about seeing *you*,” Mo Ran said, heart breaking in his throat. “Because he needed his wits about him, because we knew *you'd* be a needling dickhead! At best! We didn't know if you knew all about Hua Binan, if you–” He shut up. Jiang Xi was a doctor. He was asking questions. The important thing was helping Chu Wanning. “Sorry. Please don't– I'm sorry.”

Jiang Xi was giving him an odd look, and Mo Ran hoped he wouldn't refuse to help Chu Wanning on account of his rudeness. “What were the antibiotics for?”

“Infection. Um. There were…” Mo Ran refused to look at Xue Meng. “Internal injuries. But my aunt said that there wasn't any serious internal bleeding.”

“From when Hua Binan beat him up?” Xue Meng asked. He suddenly sounded much younger.

Mo Ran didn't look at Xue Meng. He looked at Jiang Xi. “Yeah.”

Jiang Xi's face was unreadable for a moment. Then he turned back to Chu Wanning; his eyelids were fluttering. “Ah. Wang Qingni, please could you get some water from the galley?”

“Um, sir,” Wang Qingni said, “we still have to get across the city, I can call someone else to come here –”

“I told you fetch some water,” Jiang Xi said sharply. “They can wait for me.”

They can wait for me. Mo Ran felt Chu Wanning gently winding that soft, flowery-scented scarf around his neck, his warm breath on his numb fingers. *They can wait for me.*

The words relaxed him, and he fell back onto the floor. It would be okay. They could work with Jiang Xi.

Chu Wanning was waking up, blinking in dazed confusion. Then his eyes flew wide open and he kicked Xue Meng sharply in the chest.

Xue Meng staggered back, and Chu Wanning sat up from the waist, not using his hands. Mo Ran instantly realised what had happened, and swallowed down the overwhelming nausea that followed it. Chu Wanning was already swaying, but Mo Ran saw Jiang Xi go to push him back down.

“No, no, no, let me,” he begged, shoving Jiang Xi to the side. He didn’t care what the billionaire thought of them all; he knew a strange man pushing Chu Wanning down would incite disaster. “Hey, *baobei*. It’s me. It’s me. Lie down, you’re feeling dizzy.”

“Mo Ran…?” Chu Wanning fisted his hand in Mo Ran’s jumper, an expression of sheer terror on his face, but after reassuring himself that it really was Mo Ran he allowed to slowly steer him back down onto the sofa. “Where… I thought I saw…”

“Just Xue Meng. He was holding your legs up because you fainted. Gravity helping the blood or something, right?” he said, desperately willing Xue Meng not to ask what happened. He had one hand flat on Chu Wanning’s chest, a comforting weight over his heart, and with the other, out of Chu Wanning’s sight, he motioned for silence.

Chu Wanning shuddered. “I thought it was– I thought…”

“No, it’s just because it’s an unfamiliar place. That’s all, *baobei*. Look, it’s Xue Meng, look,” Mo Ran said, and moved out of the way to allow Chu Wanning to see.

Xue Meng gave Chu Wanning a watery smile.

“Did I kick you…?”

“Not hard,” Xue Meng said.

“Payback for the far worse kick he gave me yesterday.” Mo Ran smiled down, stroking his hair. “You’re fine. You were just a bit dizzy. We’re on the plane in Beijing…”

“I ruined it,” Chu Wanning whispered. “I was trying to hold it together, but I– I don't know what else we can do.”

“You’ve not ruined a thing. You were only out for a couple of secs, yeah? It’s all good. Isn’t it, Mengmeng?”

“It’s all good if you don’t call me ‘Mengmeng’, you stupid dog.”

Mo Ran grinned. “See?”

“Jiang Xi…”

“He didn’t see anything – but he’s coming back in now,” Mo Ran said, directing the tableau.

“Fainting, Professor Chu? Shall I fetch the smelling salts? No, don’t get up,” he said, and Mo Ran felt a surge of gratitude for the fact that his voice was the exact same degree of rich arsehole as before. “Apparently you haven’t slept?”

“None of us have,” Chu Wanning said. “I mean, a couple of hours…”

“Hm. And if you’ve not eaten enough…” Jiang Xi sighed. He banged a panel on the side of the armchair he’d been sitting in, and revealed a pile of Mars Bars and Kinder Buenos. “The emergency stash. Your blood sugar’s probably low. I want these replaced, by the way.”

“It’s a great expense,” Mo Ran said, gathering up some of the chocolate bars. “If you just give us a minute, we can make our way to ICBC, we know you’ve got a meeting.”

Jiang Xi waved a hand. “Change of plan. The last thing I need is you taking your turn to pass out in the bank. Wang Qingni will go with you to the hotel and check you in. Sleep for a few hours and we’ll reconvene tonight at dinner. Leave the government permission to me. And you, Professor Chu, lie down for five minutes with your legs on the armrest, and then you can get up.” He tossed a bottle of water to Mo Ran. “All right, my side, with me.”

Chapter 86: Xiao Jiu Wo

Chapter Notes

> A lot's been going on, irl and in the last few chapters, and this one became so long I've decided to split it into two. Which means this one is pure fluff! Are you proud of me?! XD

Mo Ran had volunteered to take the middle seat, knowing that Chu Wanning hated it. “Um,” he said to Wang Qingni in the front seat of the car, “are we going to be driving past the Forbidden City?”

“Mo Ran is a Zhen Huan fan,” Chu Wanning explained.

“Oh?” Wang Qingni turned around to give Mo Ran her full attention. “*What other secrets have you been keeping from me?*”

Chu Wanning was stunned by the sudden change in her tone, but Mo Ran laughed.

“My Startled Swan Dance definitely has to be seen to be believed. Chu Wanning is the guqin player, though. Xue Meng, you can be An Lingrong and sing for us.”

“I wish I’d known,” Wang Qingni said. “I thought the Qianmen Mandarin Oriental would be quieter, and they have two-bedroom suites, but I could have booked the Wangfujing one and you’d have had views of the Forbidden City.”

“Ah, it’s all right,” Mo Ran said. “I’m sure the Qianmen one’s really nice. It’s just me being a fanboy.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed that you’d like…”

“I was in a house with three *jiejie* when I was a teenager. There was no choice in the matter.”

Mo Ran’s tone was joking but his smile was wistful, and it made Chu Wanning’s damaged heart flutter again with pain for him. He was trying to make light of it, he knew, but it suddenly made sense why Mo Ran was so attached to a drama about concubines. Chu Wanning strengthened his resolve and became determined to watch all seventy hours of it.

“Why’s it called the Purple Forbidden City?” Xue Meng asked with an oddly suspicious tone. “It’s red and orangey in the pictures.”

“It’s because the Purple Forbidden Enclosure is one of the three astronomical enclosures,” Chu Wanning said. “It contains the North Star, which is the *Ziwei* Emperor. He’s one of the Four Heavenly Ministers, along with the Jade Emperor, the Empress of the Earth, and the Gouchen Emperor. But the *Ziwei* Emperor is also called the *Beiji* Emperor, so he’s the best fit for the new capital of Beijing. The Forbidden City on earth mirrors in the one in heaven, just like the terrestrial Emperor mirrors the celestial one.”

“How do you know that?” Wang Qingni had turned in her seat to stare at him, and Chu Wanning looked away in discomfort.

“I lived in Beijing for several years,” he said, implying that that was how he had learnt it. That was more normal, surely, than an obsession with Taoist mythology.

“I thought that northern heavenly enclosures were your homeland?” Mo Ran said with a grin. “Aren’t you the Beidou Immortal?”

“What- How do you know that name?!”

“*Everyone* knows that name.”

Chu Wanning groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"I know it too," Xue Meng said, elbowing Mo Ran in the ribs. "My dad told me, when I asked why he always calls you Yuheng."

"The Beidou Immortal…" Wang Qingni said in a faraway voice, and then cleared her throat. "I mean! Um, I mean, I just thought that the Qianmen one would be quieter, more private." She was apparently still worried about her disgraceful lack of telepathy. "Especially if, um, you were feeling tired…"

"I'm sure it will be wonderful, Ms. Wang," Chu Wanning said, throttling the spirit of shame. He had already embarrassed himself enough for one journey. "I currently don't have a phone, but I have a card, if we can arrange to pay that way."

"Oh, no, no, you're Dr. Jiang's guests! He's paying for it all, and he wants you to order whatever food or drink or spa treatments you like, honestly. He always puts a few thousand yuan behind the desk, it's all paid for already. He regrets that he can't host you at his own house, but he… he doesn't want to," she said, with a final moment of honesty.

She beamed at Chu Wanning, and in contrast to her surgically perfect face, one of her teeth was charmingly crooked. "And please, call me Wang Qingni. Ms. Wang makes me think I'm back in my first week. Dr. Jiang always likes his assistants to be called 'Wang', it's an unspoken rule – he said his first assistant was called Wang, and he got used to the name… That must have been your mother? Wang Chuqing? Is that Qing as in the dynasty, with the water radical? That's mine!"

"No, it's got the sun radical…" Xue Meng said, frowning.

"Ah, that's a shame, we could have matched two out of three!"

She noted down their heights and shoe sizes, and took photographs of each of them on her phone – for colouring, apparently. Chu Wanning allowed it, but had no intention of allowing Xue Meng to accompany them to the New Year's Eve party. They might have allowed him to

join them in Beijing, but he was not going to put him in any more danger than absolutely necessary.

But he was tired, and felt raw and vulnerable, and that argument could wait until they had slept.

The hotel was in fact a restored *hutong* neighbourhood, and their 'suite' was actually a traditional *siheyuan* house, complete with a living and dining room and a separate tea room, arranged around a small central courtyard.

"I'll let you catch up on sleep," Wang Qingni said – she seemed much more at ease with them in Jiang Xi's absence. "Call me if you need anything at all! I'm staying in the courtyard next to you, and I'm going out to pick up some things for you. If you need something while I'm out, press 1 on any of the phones and it'll put you through to this suite's concierge team. Dr. Jiang said to order anything you like, just rest!"

Mo Ran managed to wait until she had left before pulling his jumper up over his head. "It's so warm! How can it have floor-to-ceiling windows and still be warm?!"

"Central heating," Chu Wanning said, luxuriating in it. "I think there's under-floor heating as well…"

"Do you want to eat?"

"No, just sleep."

"Same," Mo Ran said with audible relief. "Mengmeng, we're going to sleep!"

A loud groan just about filtered through the living room from Xue Meng's side of the courtyard; Chu Wanning received the impression that he'd collapsed on his king-size bed face-down and fully clothed.

He at least managed to change into his pyjamas before he collapsed (again). Mo Ran only changed into pyjama bottoms, apparently revelling in it being warm enough for him to go about topless. His carnelian necklace glinted blood-red in the cold Beijing light.

Chu Wanning could not help but stare at it as they closed the curtains and the blinds and climbed stiffly into the bed. He hated the thought of it in Hua Binan's hands. He thought that he had been looking for it, the night that Shi Mingjing helped him to escape, but those last few hours were… difficult to remember. Fevered and painful. What was worse, for it to be in Hua Binan's hands, or for it to be in Mu Yanli's, evidence of his 'murder'?

The sight of Mo Ran opening his arms to him soothed his heart a little; his skin burnt like the metal of a stove, and Chu Wanning could smell the heat of his skin. It did more for his fluttering heart than his medication had.

Mo Ran reached out the turn off the light. "I can't believe this bed. What the fuck."

"It's the size of a room." Chu Wanning's fingertip lingered on the warm stone. "You should ask in reception. You could buy one. And a new flat to keep it in."

"A *two-bedroom* flat, oooh." Chu Wanning felt the comforting weight of Mo Ran's fingers on his hair. They had lain like this that last night in Yuliang – Chu Wanning's head between Mo Ran's chest and his hand, quiet at last.

That had been real, he reminded himself. Mo Ran had known about Shi Mingjing's lie before Yuliang, so his kindness then had been genuine. It had not been part of the deceit.

"The necklace…"

Chu Wanning realised that he had been touching it again; he pulled his hand away, and hid his face against Mo Ran's chest. "He took it…" he murmured, and he felt Mo Ran draw a deep breath beneath his cheek. "I couldn't…"

He felt so pathetic. He had been too weak and too gullible to protect the gift that Mo Ran had given him. He had almost been too weak to protect Mo Ran's life too…

No. Mo Ran was alive. Mo Ran was safe and warm and breathing beneath him, and while that was true, Chu Wanning could live too. *Dum anima est, spes esse.*

He dreamt, but not unbearably – vague revulsion and anxiety and dread, rather than terror or devastation. He thought that he woke at one point: the room was dark, and Mo Ran was getting up.

"Just need to make a phone call," he said in his low, deep voice. "Back in just a second."

"Mnrgh," Chu Wanning responded, curling into the warmth that Mo Ran left behind. There were murmurs in the next room, and then then Mo Ran returned, lying down beside him and pulling the thick white covers back up.

Chu Wanning ran his hand down Mo Ran's chest – ludicrous, how firm and delineated those muscles were. He wanted to look at Mo Ran's face, take in its shadowed beauty, but his eyelids were too heavy to open. "Mn?"

"All fine. Back to sleep."

"Mn..."

The next thing he knew was the sound of the blinds being opened, and the creeping of red light across the tasteful wooden furniture. He groaned and rolled over, his limbs feeling heavy and lazy. "What time is it…?"

"About half four. Hi," Mo Ran said, and gave him a quick, chaste kiss. "How are you feeling?"

“Better. What about you? How did you sleep?”

“Like the dead. Conked out immediately.”

“Didn’t you get up…?”

Mo Ran grinned. “I didn’t know if you’d remembered. Yeah, about lunchtime. I felt hot, wanted some water.”

“Mn.” Water sounded like a very good idea, and no sooner had he thought it than Mo Ran was handing him a glass, along with some pills. “Thank you.”

Mo Ran waited to take the glass from him again, and Chu Wanning sat up on the bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” Chu Wanning suddenly realised. He’d not predicted what a physical relief it would be, to be two thousand kilometres away from Hua Binan, who had no idea where they were. To be able to see Mo Ran, whole and well, and hear Xue Meng watching the television far too loudly from the other wing of the suite.

Mo Ran beamed at him in delight. “One of the restaurants does an afternoon tea, I’ll order that in. Do *not* ask how much it is.”

He did, of course, and Mo Ran refused to tell him, citing his heart. The bantering argument entertained them until the food arrived. Chu Wanning was wearing one of the hotel’s dressing gowns over his pyjamas – the bathroom had been beautiful, but the floor-to-ceiling windows had remained. He hoped very much that it was one-way glass.

The ‘afternoon tea’ arrived, and once the Maple Lounge staff had left they stared in silence at the spread on the table in their living-dining room: Amur caviar, tea-smoked quail eggs, cherry blossom-cured salmon, baba ganoush, pita bread, brioche, garlic bread, strawberry rose profiteroles, lemon pistachio cheesecake, apple pecan strudel, chocolate chestnut cake, spring mingqian Longjing green tea, aged white tea, Da Hong Pao oolong (they made eye contact when Chu Wanning wordlessly showed Mo Ran the caddy, both thinking of Jiang Xi’s ten thousand dollar ‘mistake’), along with a full coffee set and an ice bucket with a bottle of Louis Roederer champagne.

The silence stretched.

“Twenty-four hours ago,” Chu Wanning said conversationally, “we were checking my flat for cameras.”

Mo Ran blinked in astonishment. Chu Wanning kept his face carefully blank, but it took more and more effort as Mo Ran burst like a sky full of fireworks into uproarious laughter for the second time that day.

“Isn’t it ridiculous?!” he managed to croak between paroxysms. “Look at this shit!”

Chu Wanning’s mask cracked; the ludicrousness of their flight over the roofs in comparison to the elegant, peaceful luxury here was too much to bear. The first giggle escaped him, and that set Mo Ran off again, until they were both entirely lost to laughter. Mo Ran pointed to the caviar, Chu Wanning held the Da Hong Pao tea like he was advertising it, managing a still face for a split second, and the tears were soon streaming down their faces.

“Did you see the bathtub? With the windows?”

“I've never had caviar - look, it has a mother-of-pearl spoon, I've read about it-”

“It’s fucking obscene – we have our own fucking butler!”

“Language,” Chu Wanning said, with a wavering impression of his strict teaching voice, and by the time the next bout of hilarity ended his head was in his arms, while Mo Ran lay on the floor, breathing like he’d been sprinting.

Mo Ran rolled over and pulled himself up using Chu Wanning’s leg. He stopped halfway up, and wrapped his arms around Chu Wanning’s waist.

When they had been in Yuliang, Chu Wanning had thought that he would like to kiss Mo Ran’s dimples. But they only appeared when he smiled, and a kiss from Chu Wanning would awaken the opposite response. He’d been sure. But now Mo Ran was looking up at him with creased eyes and the deepest dimples Chu Wanning had ever seen, so deep that they could hold enough wine to make even Chu Wanning drunk.

His heart was in his throat, beating a tattoo against the line the rope had made, as he lifted his fingers to Mo Ran’s jaw, and in place of his lip, allowed his thumb to brush over one of those dimples.

Mo Ran inhaled sharply, and his eyes were *so dark*, the sparkling darkness that Chu Wanning had only seen through telescopes. He pressed Chu Wanning’s hand to his cheek.

“I realised something, earlier.”

The anxiety was instantaneous, as icy and tangible as a stalactite dropping down from above and piercing him through. The possibilities of Mo Ran’s realisation presented themselves in nauseatingly swift succession: that he didn’t love Chu Wanning, that Chu Wanning was never going to change, that he was never going to improve, that what Hua Binan had done to him was too disgusting and damaging for Mo Ran to move on from, that he would never feel any sexual desire for him again, that too many terrible things had happened for Mo Ran to ever-

“No,” Mo Ran said, capturing his face between his hands. “No. Nothing like that. *Baobei*… No. Um. It was the necklace. You mentioned it just before you went to sleep.”

Chu Wanning exhaled. He nodded. “He took it. I couldn’t stop him…”

“No, no, I know. I know. The chain was broken.”

“Yes, he pulled–” Chu Wanning blinked. “How did you know that?”

“Shi Mei had it. He put it in the bag with the medications. But when I came in they were all on the floor – I thought you’d thrown it away–”

Chu Wanning shook his head; his breath stuttered out. “No, *no* – Wang Chuqing had, she’d said something, I was angry at her, and when I saw that- that cream, I couldn’t bear it, I just threw the whole bag–”

“That’s what I meant, I thought you’d hated seeing it, but then you said ‘he took it’ and I *realised* that you didn’t know that Shi Mei had put it in the bag–” Mo Ran was grinning; he had let go on Chu Wanning’s hand, but only to rifle through his pocket. “When I woke up to have a drink, I thought, shit, we have a concierge team, don’t we, it doesn’t need to be expensive, so I rang them while you were asleep to ask them to buy a replacement chain, in case– In case. In case you wanted to wear it again.”

Chu Wanning was already gathering up his hair with shaking hands.

Mo Ran stared at him for a second, and Chu Wanning couldn’t read the expression on his face. He thought for a strange moment that Mo Ran was about to burst into tears.

Instead he moved behind Chu Wanning, and the familiar cool weight was against his breastbone again, and Chu Wanning felt as though a splinter had been removed from his chest, or a bullet from his gut, or a shard of glass from his throat.

He felt Mo Ran’s trembling hands against the back of his neck, his breathing just as shaky, and then the lips against the spot behind his ear; the sensation sent electricity down his spine and heat to his pelvis.

“Wanning, god, Wanning. What did I do to deserve you…?”

Chu Wanning turned around; it was *Mo Ran* who had been so generous, so brave, so selfless and so solicitous, and it was Chu Wanning who was too stupid and too cowardly to articulate this. But then again, he didn’t have a chance, as the second that they were facing each other, Mo Ran was bending over to kiss him.

His kisses were deep and long, and Chu Wanning matched them. For the most part. He only broke away once, to press a brief, small kiss to Mo Ran’s dimple, and drink intoxicating wine from it.

Chapter 87: A Discovery of Humanity

Chapter Notes

> Omg, guys, please forgive me for a. not replying to your comments last chapter and b. the time it took to publish this chapter. Work has been hard and horrible, and I'm 99% sure I'm going to resign tomorrow. But anyway, far more important: chapter, and Xue Meng! 💖

They kissed until Chu Wanning's stomach grumbled. He broke away in embarrassment, and hid his face when Mo Ran laughed.

"I'm being selfish," he said. "I could kiss you forever."

Ears burning, Chu Wanning flapped his hand at him to make him shut up. "Go and fetch your cousin, he needs to eat as well." He could hear Xue Meng whining at being brought away from whatever he was watching, but the complaints vanished when he took in the spread.

"Oh, shit," he said, and sat down. "How many types of bread do they have? Why is there so much bread?"

Chu Wanning began to divide up the food – salmon, quail eggs, and the garlic bread. "Try the caviar first," he suggested. "Use the spoon to place a little in the web between your thumb and forefinger."

"Don't you eat it off toast?" Mo Ran said. "I saw it in a drama."

"I suppose the pita would be plain enough. But the hand is traditional, so that nothing else effects the taste."

“When did you have caviar?” Xue Meng asked.

“Oh, I never have. I read it in a book.”

They each tried the caviar in silence, and in the same moment, they each clearly decided against another attempt. Chu Wanning didn’t mind the saltiness too much, but the crunchy texture with it made him far too conscious of the fact that he was eating fish eggs, and the unexpected marriage of texture and taste was difficult to move past. He managed to swallow the caviar, and wiped the back of his hand with his napkin.

“Not a fan,” Mo Ran said, and smirked at Xue Meng. “What about you? Do you have a more refined palate than a dog?”

“It’s fine,” Xue Meng said, but Chu Wanning was quite sure that he was lying. “I just fancy something else, that’s all.”

Chu Wanning left them to it – now that he was finally eating, he could barely stop. Once his dignity had been appeased in clearing the savoury elements from his plate, he loaded it up with a second meal from the various desserts. He tasted a little of each and made a mental ranking: strudel at the bottom, lemon and pistachio cheesecake, strawberry rose profiteroles, and then the ludicrously decadent chocolate chestnut cake. He worked his way around them evenly while Mo Ran and Xue Meng fought over the last glass of champagne.

“You should try the Da Hong Pao,” Chu Wanning suggested gently to Xue Meng. “Now that the air pressure can’t ruin it…”

Xue Meng looked straight at him, and Chu Wanning suddenly felt a chill sweep through the room. He had suggested the tea, he realised, to reassure himself that Xue Meng was not angry with him for what had happened on the plane, but Xue Meng’s reaction was one he had never seen in his student before.

Chu Wanning was the one who looked away. He was sure that he had apologised to Xue Meng for kicking him in his confusion, but perhaps it had been harder than he’d thought. Had it bruised? Was Xue Meng scared of him?

Mo Ran seemed to catch the change in atmosphere. “I’ll take some, see what’s so special–”

“Can I talk to you?” Xue Meng asked; he had interrupted Mo Ran, but was looking at Chu Wanning. “Alone?”

It was always something of a relief, when the other shoe dropped. Chu Wanning nodded. “Of course.”

Mo Ran grabbed the last strawberry profiterole. “I need a shower anyway.” He glanced at Chu Wanning, who returned the look as blankly as possible. They waited for Mo Ran to leave.

Chu Wanning poured the tea. “How is your chest?” he asked. "Does it still hurt?”

“What?”

“I kicked you. I… I didn’t mean to. I thought that you were… someone else.”

“Hua Binan?”

“Mn. Maybe. It was someone touching...” Touching his legs. Forcing them up. How to explain to Xue Meng that every time he had tried to kick, and every time his injected legs had refused to obey him? But the trying had been important to him. The struggle. Every time. He never wanted to let Hua Binan think that he was consenting. He wanted Hua Binan to know what he was doing. No. Obviously there was no way he would ever tell Xue Meng such hideous things. “It doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“You couldn’t help it. You weren’t awake.”

“I should have realised.”

“How? Chu-*laoshi*…” Xue Meng looked like he was about to say something, and with a moment of dawning horror Chu Wanning worried that it was going to be something *reassuring*, at which he would have no choice but to get up and leave the room. “Mo Ran… Mo Ran said that your dad stabbed you.”

Chu Wanning exhaled. Until a year ago, Huaizui stabbing him had been one of the most painful and shameful moments of his life. Now, he was no longer sure it was in the top five. Top ten, if you didn’t count what Hua Binan had done as a single outrage.

Top one hundred, in that case.

“Yes. When I was fifteen.”

“When you… My, my dad always said you were an orphan…”

“I don’t know. I was abandoned when I was about eighteen months old, adopted when I turned six. So I could be. I don’t know. Huaizui never called himself my father, we used the word ‘guardian’.”

He’d never dreamed that it could be a relief to be talking about Huaizui to one of his students, but compared to what else Xue Meng could be asking about… These questions, Chu Wanning could answer. This, Chu Wanning was able to give.

“But why would he…?” Xue Meng looked so distressed that Chu Wanning ached to comfort him. He thought *he’s too young to hear this*, but that wasn’t true, was it? Xue Meng was nearly ten years older than Chu Wanning had been when Huaizui stabbed him. At Xue Meng’s age, he’d been in detention, he’d been in RSDL.

It wasn’t about age, he realised. It was about innocence.

“He wanted me to be the youngest doctorate in China. I wanted to volunteer in Sichuan after the earthquake. We clashed.”

“So he *stabbed* you?! Over *that*?!”

“Ah. Not quite. No. No, we argued for about six months. I wasn’t allowed out, and saw no one. I spoke to my supervisor on speakerphone, with him in the room. And he tried to make me relent. He tried everything he could think of, and he became more and more…” Xue Meng looked confused and upset, so Chu Wanning smiled to comfort him. “It’s good, in a way. I was in solitary confinement in RSDL, of course, and when I had to kneel in the box or not move for a few hours I was already used to it. So it’s quite funny, really, isn’t it?”

Xue Meng’s expression suggested that he disagreed. Chu Wanning inwardly cringed at how flat the attempt had fallen, and covered his embarrassment by fiddling with his teacup.

“Anyway, one day it became a little too much. I knew he was going out, so I waited and then I smashed my window open. He’d boarded it up from the outside, but I was able to kick the boards out and jump down. I went to my supervisor in Rufeng, Rong Yan – she was Nangong Si’s mother. I told her everything, and she was… She looked it up for me, and she said that by law, even though I was under eighteen, there was a possibility I could apply for the adoptive relationship to be terminated. Normally Huaizui would have to agree, but there’s a caveat that if the adopter mistreats or neglects the adoptee, the person who placed the child up for adoption can demand termination of the relationship. Obviously, in my case, that wasn’t an option. But Rong Yan suggested that we could say that the State had put me up for adoption, and we could bring a suit arguing that in a people’s court.”

Chu Wanning grimaced. “Legally, it’s very tenuous. But she also made the point that Huaizui was obsessed with our reputation as well, and that he would hate for it to be brought up in a court that he’d kept me locked in a single room with no light for six months. It hardly gave the impression that he wanted.”

He blinked and looked away. “She offered to come with me, to talk to him. I should have… But I was embarrassed. I had already been embarrassed to tell her what had been happening, but the thought of her witnessing an argument was just too shameful. And I did feel ashamed. It felt so unfilial. Ungrateful. And he was still the only… So. I went alone. I told him that I

wanted to terminate the adoptive relationship, and that Rong Yan knew everything, and that's when he stabbed me."

He cleared his throat, and gave what he thought was a confident smile. "It all worked out in the end. He pled guilty, he went to prison for eight years, and he agreed for the relationship to be terminated. I lived with Rong Yan and Nangong Si for a few months after I left the hospital, then in a room in Rufeng until the end of my doctorate. I just have to take some pills when my heart-rate is a little thready, and this morning I hadn't slept enough, hadn't eaten enough, and hadn't taken my medication. That's… that's why I was dizzy, and confused. It was entirely my fault."

Xue Meng was looking at him in a way that he had never looked at Chu Wanning before. It was somehow wide-eyed with surprise and scrunched-up with distress in the same moment – it was very strange, and it made his stomach flip over with guilt. The simulacrum of the confident smile slid off his face, and his gaze dropped to the floor, as though he might see it there.

"I'm really sorry, Chu-*laoshi*."

"You have nothing to be sorry for – I'm the one who needs to apologise, for kicking–"

"Please! Please don't– That's not a problem. Please don't apologise for it again."

He sounded like his cousin in that moment, as though they really were linked by blood. Chu Wanning's eyes darted up to meet Xue Meng's for a microsecond, but his gaze was too beseeching, too earnest, and it burnt him.

"I never knew any of this. Because I never *asked*. I never…"

"I'm glad you didn't," Chu Wanning said. "I'm glad you never searched for it online, or asked about me."

“But I should have. I should have known about all this, about all the…”

“Meng’er,” Chu Wanning said, as he rarely did, “believe me. I’m glad that you didn’t. It was a relief, to simply be your teacher. To know that you weren’t thinking about those things.”

Maybe it made him a bad teacher, to have found rest in Xue Meng’s childish solipsism, instead of encouraging empathy, or even curiosity. But the evidence that he was a terrible teacher was now writ on and in his body, and it was a delusion of which he would have to let go eventually.

Oh, but it was hard.

He managed another smile – smaller, this time, and sad, but sincere. “And as your teacher, I really ought to discipline you for breaking another student’s nose.”

Xue Meng started. “Did– did *he* tell you that?”

“No, Mo Ran did.” Chu Wanning dared to make eye contact with Xue Meng. “I should scold you. I really shouldn’t thank you.”

Xue Meng’s shoulders relaxed, and his unfamiliar expression faded, and then he finally smiled. “No?”

“Absolutely not. It would be very, very wrong of me, to imply that I approve of your breaking another student’s nose.”

“It wouldn’t look very good on a lab report.”

“It would not. And I am scrupulously honest in all of my lab reports, so I would have to say that imagining it has given me some degree of satisfaction.”

Xue Meng's smile widened into a grin. "Ah, there's another detail I should report – he ran away like a little bitch. Did Mo Ran tell you that?"

"You know, he did *not* – running in a hospital room, hmm, that could have been dangerous for the doctors and nurses."

"And he was bleeding, so he could have slipped on the blood. Or someone else. That's not very good lab safety."

"Quite right, Xue Meng, quite right," Chu Wanning said, pretending to write an invisible incident report. "Well, thank you for your honesty. I've decided that on this occasion there is no need to discipline you for your actions, because it made me very happy to hear it and I was very grateful to you, but there'll be problems if you break any further noses of fellow students."

Xue Meng's eyes were warm. He looked like his old self again. "What about *former* students?"

"Hm. I would prefer it if you didn't break the noses of any former Master's students. But for former *doctoral* students, you may break as many noses as you like."

*

The hotel had a Michelin-starred Cantonese restaurant – Chu Wanning had had to explain to him what that meant, but Mo Ran just knew that the food was *fucking good*. Okay, yeah, there was yet more caviar that the three of them ignored, and which Jiang Xi noticed them ignoring and smirked at, but apart from that blip there was Chaoshan-style Ma Yu, caramelised char sui, a soup made from something called a Canadian geoduck clam which was so rich that the layer of collagen would begin to solidify between each spoonful...

Then came the deep-fried pigeon, the braised abalone, the pan-fried spiny lobster in a garlic sauce, the wagyu beef, the Yangchun noodles, and napa cabbage. Mo Ran picked up a leaf of

these with his chopsticks and winked at Chu Wanning, who kicked his ankle under the table, ears red.

Jiang Xi had ordered the set menu for all of them, so no one had had an opportunity to see how much this would cost. There were the three from Sichuan, Jiang Xi, Wang Qingni, one of Jiang Xi's financial advisors, a security advisor, a man from ICBC, one from the government, one woman from the Party, and then the Beijing head of Guyuye and his wife. Jiang Xi had booked out the whole restaurant, not wanting to share the space, and Chu Wanning seemed to be coping well until Jiang Xi ordered four bottles of fifteen year reserve Moutai "to start – no, you know what, the thirty year, screw it. We're celebrating, after all."

"The thirty year Moutai is worth the price jump," said the man from ICBC, and at that Chu Wanning had to excuse himself to the bathroom for five minutes. If they'd been in a *wuxia* drama, Mo Ran thought, there'd be blood on the ceiling by now.

But that afternoon, the government had agreed in theory to the clinic. Tomorrow, the legal and financial discussions would begin in earnest.

Chu Wanning came back, thoughts of murder absent again from his face, and ate the dessert of aged bergamot sorbet with the docility of a lamb, speaking to the two new women and answering their questions about Rufeng with visible stoicism. He glanced at Mo Ran and raised an eyebrow at Xue Meng, which Mo Ran understood to mean that Xue Meng should stop drinking. The baijiu was going to his own head, though Chu Wanning might as well have been drinking water.

Saying goodbye to the bigwigs was educational. Jiang Xi's attitude was not entirely different – he still exuded dignity and pride – but the contempt of that morning was gone; he was the perfect balance of humility and magnanimity, easing the various egos into their cars to go home.

"What a circus of boring, pompous motherfuckers," he said, waving the impromptu motorcade away with a friendly smile. "At least the food was passable. Right, let's get down to proper business. Wang Qingni, we'll take tea in the suite."

"Of course, sir."

“This is Hu Zongying, he’s the head of my personal security detail, I had him fly out from Yangzhou today. He’s been coordinating with Guyueye about ferreting out our thief.”

It was just Jiang Xi, Hu Zongying, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran who sat down in their dining room of their *siheyuan*; Wang Qingni left after fetching a tea set, and Xue Meng swayed in his seat until Chu Wanning told him, not ungently, to go to bed and sleep it off.

“So,” Hu Zongying said, once Chu Wanning had poured the tea, “first off, you were right. The theft software originated from an e-mail sent to Hua Binan and downloaded by him, with regular updates received in the same way. Very simple, very effective. It’s open and shut.”

“But how are you going to say that you discovered him?” Chu Wanning asked. “That was part of the deal.”

Hu Zongying smiled. “It was through you.”

Mo Ran shook his head. “The *whole point* is that no one knows we told you.”

“No, I know, but you don’t need to have. I looked through the Rufeng videos, to see what Nangong Xu told us about his accomplice. Obviously we know that our thief was Mu Huohan’s second child, but his first son’s name was Mu Shengshou, and we had no one on our books by that name – at least, not using the same characters. I had my team pull up all the information on them anyway. Ditto for ‘Hanlin’, though we don’t know what those characters were.”

“I believe it’s *han* as in the temperature, or ‘to have died a short time ago’,” Chu Wanning said. “*Lin* as in what’s on the body of fish, or snakes.”

“I’ll see if anything comes up. But we also know that Nangong Xu said that he had made a promise not to kill you. Presumably to our thief, the same colleague who had asked for revenge on his father. So we checked everyone who, after Rufeng, used our systems to try to

access your medical records." Hu Zongying smiled apologetically. "That gave us over a thousand results."

"They will be disciplined, of course," Jiang Xi said.

"But when we narrowed it down to *men* who had searched for you, we came in at under thirty. And of them, eight had done the same thing after the bombing in February. And of *them*, one – your former doctoral student – requested a change in location for a new Guyueye scar treatment to be moved to Shanghai, where you were in a recovery clinic, and that person had the family name Hua – the name of Mu Huohan's wife, Hua Gui. So it's all public information that led us to finding him, if I'd had the sense to do that in the first place. For which I can only apologise, Dr. Jiang."

Jiang Xi waved the apology away. "Very well. As to why we've not informed the police immediately?"

"It'll take a couple of days to, ah, collect all the files of everyone who accessed Professor Chu's records. We can tailor it to just before the party in Yangzhou, if that's the plan you want to go ahead with."

"We'll need to contact him soon," Chu Wanning said. "Today's the 27th. It's two thousand kilometres from Wuchang to Yangzhou; even if he's reckless he'll need two days to drive it."

"Surely he'd take a plane, or even a train?"

Chu Wanning shook his head. "He prefers to use drugs, but we're sure he has a gun. He's cautious. He likes to have contingencies. He won't risk being caught with a weapon on him."

"But we don't want to give him too much time to get to Yangzhou and make plans," Mo Ran said. "Don't we *want* him reckless?"

“We do. If I were him… I would suspect there would be security on the door – or the gate, or whatever the park has. He doesn’t know that Guyueye knows about him. The party is going to be by Slender West Lake, yes? I would go into the park early that morning and bury the gun. Then I can enter even if you set up metal detectors and security screenings that evening, because I know that my weapon is already there. Then he might feel secure enough to try to enter through the main entrance, and you can arrest him then.”

“What if he doesn’t, though?” Mo Ran says. “What if he jumps the fence instead, and goes for the gun?”

“So we’ll have surveillance in the park, and dig up his weapon after he buries it.”

“Hmm. If his gun is gone, he’ll be spooked. Is there a way,” Chu Wanning asked, “to sabotage a gun? So that it looks whole, but doesn’t fire?”

“Sure there is,” Hu Zongying said with a smile. “That, we can do. And keep a watch on where he’s hidden it, and capture him there.”

“So, ideally, capture him in the morning, at the door, or at his hiding spot,” Chu Wanning says. “That gives three opportunities for your team to apprehend him when he’s not armed, so you won’t have to kill him, or let him come to find us.”

“But if you tell him where it’s going to be, he’ll know it’s a trap, surely.”

“We won’t,” Mo Ran said. “Do you have a press release or something? A draft about the clinic?”

“I do,” Jiang Xi replied. “Sending it to you now.”

“I have his number, he was messaging me. So I’ll just–”

“Wait,” Hu Zongying interrupted. “He’s been *messaging* you?”

“Yeah, yesterday. He was trying to get me to go outside to meet him.”

Hu Zongying held out his hand. “Great. Let me see them.”

Chapter 88: Aye, There's The Rub

Chapter Notes

> Complete with a diploma in "Dry Humping as Trauma Counselling", welcome back Taxian-jun. 🫡

“Absolutely not,” Chu Wanning was saying, but Mo Ran studied Hu Zongying. Some part of him, deep down, knew that his instinctive reaction was irrational – Hu Zongying didn’t know what he was asking, or what the messages contained – but it was buried beneath a wild, blinding rage.

“I don’t like to be kept out of the loop,” Hu Zongying said. He was still holding his disgusting hand out, and Mo Ran stared at it. Quite unbidden, an image came to him: pinning it to the satinwood table with one of the steak-knives they’d used for the damn wagyu beef they’d eaten earlier.

Chu Wanning’s back was ramrod straight, and his voice was like the clinking of icicles in tree branches. “You don’t need to see them.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“It’s not happening,” Chu Wanning said. “Hua Binan tried to make Mo Ran angry enough to be lured outside. Mo Ran didn’t fall for it. Instead he laughed, and Hua Binan was angry instead. He revealed the angles of my flat that he could see, and so gave us the clue that he was using cameras.”

“But what did he use to try to make you angry?” Hu Zongying said to Mo Ran, oblivious as to how close to death he was.

Angry. Angry. All day, he’d kept a lid on his anger. Just like yesterday. Hua Binan had sent those videos to him, and Mo Ran had been blind with rage, but today’s anger was different.

Colder.

It was anger at the private plane. Jiang Xi's atrocious manners and arrogant provocations. The hotel, the tea, the food and the drink. Chu Wanning had been angry as well, but his anger had been pure – it was an anger of principle, an anger of the mind and the soul, that so much money could be spent on such bullshit.

Mo Ran's anger wasn't like that. His was an anger of the heart and the gut. How much of his mother's medication had he eaten and drunk today? How much pain could he have saved her, if he was able to vomit it up in *renminbi*? The bastard who had fucked his mother had been murdered in front of him, and so now he was the kind of person who flew in a private jet, with fuckers like this, who wanted to humiliate Chu Wanning again on some flimsy bullshit premise, just because he couldn't cope with being out of the loop? Because they were so used to receiving all those special files from the police, used to being able to spy on anyone they wanted – an attitude clearly shared by half of Guyueye – that being denied access to *his* phone was causing this kind of whinging argument?

"It's irrelevant," Chu Wanning said. "Mo Ran's too smart for that. It didn't work."

On another day, that sentence would have set off fireworks in Mo Ran's head. But the past two weeks acted like a smothering fire-blanket, and instead of exploding into joyful light, his heart roasted into something deeper and darker.

"The fact that Hua Binan tried it makes it relevant – I need to know everything I can glean about this man if *you* want me to catch him!"

"You already know everything you need," Chu Wanning countered. "If it weren't for us, you wouldn't have a clue who you even needed to be learning about."

"What the *hell* is in those messages?!" Hu Zongying said, audibly incredulous that they were being so stubborn; he had stood up, and was looming over the table.

“Zongying,” Jiang Xi said, looking at Chu Wanning.

“If Chu Wanning says that you don’t need to see them,” Mo Ran said in a low voice, “then you don’t need to see them.”

“What’s got you two acting like this? What’s he blackmailing you with?”

Chu Wanning had been staring up at Hu Zongying for his entire tirade, despite how much he hated eye contact. His face was as cold and as still as stone. “Sit down.”

“It’s for all of our protection!”

Chu Wanning blinked, and Mo Ran watched as his eyes went from meeting Hu Zongying’s to looking through them.

Then his gaze slid from the security agent’s face, and became fixed on a spot on the wall.

Mo Ran shoved his chair back and stood up – in spite of his rage, he felt a tiny glimmer of satisfaction that he was taller than this guy. “Get the fuck out.”

Hu Zongying looked at Jiang Xi and spread his hands; he didn’t know why his statement had evoked such a response. Mo Ran technically didn’t either, but he could see Chu Wanning’s hands under the table, fingers spread and wrists braced, and he just *knew* that this was something Hua Binan had said, the same words or intonation or stance, whatever, but *something* was sending him back to where he’d been held.

“I need all the information that is available before I put my men in danger – Dr. Jiang, I can’t work under these circumstances!”

“Then don’t,” Mo Ran said, not caring that his and Chu Wanning’s reactions were probably revelatory in themselves. He didn’t give a fuck. Let Jiang Xi and Hu Zongying come to

whatever conclusions they wanted, but they would never, *ever* see so much as a single frame of any of those videos. “It’s off. Thanks for dinner, Dr. Jiang.”

“Sit down, Mo Ran. Let’s discuss this like adults.”

“We were, until your– No,” Mo Ran said, because Chu Wanning was still staring at the *fucking wall*. “Out. Get out! Fuck off!”

Hu Zongying’s face was twisted. “How *dare you*–”

“Leave it,” Jiang Xi said, standing up in a single elegant movement. “I’ll explain outside. Keep your phone, Mo Ran, and we’ll talk tomorrow morning.” His gaze lingered on Chu Wanning for a second, and whatever he saw there made his eyelid twitch. “Sleep well. Both of you.”

Mo Ran wanted to hit him. He restrained himself until Jiang Xi and Hu Zongying had stepped out into the courtyard, and then he dragged an unresisting Chu Wanning up and pulled him into the bathroom.

It was the only place that he was sure had one-way glass. Why did rich people build everything out of glass? Because they expected their privacy to exist in other people’s minds. They knew they could buy their behaviour, all so that they could survey their fucking domains without impediment. Walls were for plebs.

He held Chu Wanning upright against the wall by the sink. “Wanning. Wanning. Look at me.”

Chu Wanning stared through him.

A chill ran over the surface of his skin, followed by a burning heat. “Look at *me*!” Even without worrying about what Chu Wanning himself was thinking and feeling… It was selfish, he knew, but he couldn’t go back to standing outside of the city. He couldn’t go back to watching Chu Wanning stare at the walls, he couldn’t go back to feeling like a ghost…

No. It was worse than that.

He couldn't go back to feeling like a beggar, whom everyone refused to look at or acknowledge. Even Chu Wanning…

It hurt, it fucking *hurt*, and knowing that it was irrational, knowing that Chu Wanning was suffering too, didn't make it hurt any less. It made him sick – it made him feel as though Hua Binan was a physical presence, standing between them, keeping them apart.

Well, *fuck* that, Mo Ran thought, and pressed the full length of his body along Chu Wanning's, shoving one thigh between his legs to maintain contact all the way down. He *pushed*, and the pressure of being caught between Mo Ran and the wall made Chu Wanning blink, made something in his face flicker. Made his shoulders lower by just half an inch.

"Look at me. Not at him. Look at *me*."

Chu Wanning looked as though he was trying to focus on his face. "Mo Ran…?"

Who else would it be? Huh? Who else do you think I'd be?

Mo Ran gripped Chu Wanning's wrists at his waist, and that was wrong – Chu Wanning stiffened and tried to pull away. But the memory of that night with the drug at the Sichuan Whisky Bar was like a splinter in his mind, and the memory turned into instinct. He raised Chu Wanning's hands over his head instead, and held them against the wall.

Chu Wanning exhaled, and finally seemed to truly see Mo Ran. "What are you- the wall's *glass*, they'll see–!"

Mo Ran looked over his shoulder; Hu Zongying and Jiang Xi were in an animated argument in the courtyard. "Let's hope they don't turn around then," he said, knowing perfectly well

that they wouldn't be able to see through the bathroom glass. But as he felt an increasing pressure against his thigh, he wondered whether the possibility of discovery was something Chu Wanning might be interested in. "Unless you are hoping for that. Hoping that they see us."

"Of course not!" Chu Wanning hissed. He struggled again, but that was all, Mo Ran thought. No knee to the balls, despite the perfect placement for such a rejection…

"No?" Mo Ran grinned, satisfied by his success. "You don't want them to see how I can't keep my hands off you…?"

"Of course not!" Chu Wanning tried to push Mo Ran's grip off his wrists, looking over his shoulder to their courtyard.

He should have stepped back. Despite the lust like solid heat in between the tendons of his muscles, making his bones itch, a small part of Mo Ran's brain told him to stop. Chu Wanning was hurt, he'd been hurt so badly, and what was Mo Ran *doing*?

But… but. But Mo Ran was not an idiot. Not usually. And when it came to *sex*, he was the fucking savant. Leave the maths and the music and the astrophysics and philosophy and literature and languages and engineering and chess and whatever the fuck else to Chu Wanning, but in *this*, Mo Ran knew what he was doing. Or his body did, even if his brain took a second to catch up.

Because he could feel Chu Wanning's erection against his thigh, and even in the dim lighting he could see how red his ears were, and he could hear the slightest hitch in Chu Wanning's breathing.

He shifted his leg, and an infinitesimal whine escaped Chu Wanning's throat; he pushed his wrists again, but it was half-hearted in comparison to the way his hips arched forwards.

"You *slut*," Mo Ran said gleefully. His face had the thickness of rhinoceros hide, while Chu Wanning's was more comparable to a cobweb, and he knew exactly how to make Chu

Wanning squirm with furious embarrassment. Teasing him was a pleasure that would never get old.

Chu Wanning's glare was murderous, but the way he wriggled was less of an attempt to escape and more of a chasing of sensation.

And that murderous glare… It did something to his cock, obviously, but it did something to his heart as well. Because Chu Wanning hadn't looked at him like that since Shanghai. Even the expressions of irritation or rage or contempt since then had had more weariness than fire, but right now Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes were scorching.

Mo Ran's nature thrilled to it. It was *because* Mo Ran was being such a piece of shit, he knew without confusing himself by thinking; for the first time since they'd escaped captivity, Mo Ran wasn't treating him with kid gloves. He was treating him like he'd fantasied about treating that stuck-up bastard Professor Chu, before all of this, before everything people had done to his Wanning.

It meant, perversely, Mo Ran was thinking of him with a twisted admiration. Not pity. He was trying to drag him down, but that meant that Mo Ran was showing by his dirty actions that he *still looked up to Chu Wanning*.

"You've been ever so clever and strong and stoic for them, but you're riding *my* thigh," he murmured, and Chu Wanning's breath stuttered in response. "Shush, shush. You don't want to wake Xue Meng, do you? And you don't want them outside to wonder who's making you make these noises…"

He was rewarded by the sight of Chu Wanning pressing his lips together, gagging himself with his own willpower. It drove him fucking *crazy*. He'd never enjoyed the performative panting and loud shrieks that Song Quitong and Rong Jiu had used to make it sound like they were enjoying themselves, but the sight of Chu Wanning trying *not* to make a sound while Mo Ran tried just as hard to drag a noise of pleasure out of him made his bones feel like hot metal.

He retained just enough of a hold on himself not to rip their trousers down, but he moved in such a way that Chu Wanning forcefully exhaled through his nose. It turned him on more than any moan could have – but there was time for that.

“I think you’d like for them to come in again and see you like this…” he said, but he couldn’t even *joke* about it – the idea of that asshole Hu Zongying seeing *his Wanning* like this, even fully clothed… Unbearable. Intolerable. He tightened his grip on Chu Wanning’s wrists, stretching his arms up higher, and transferring both to one hand.

His newly free right hand drifted down Chu Wanning’s neck, down his chest, down… And when he tugged Chu Wanning’s shirt free from the waistband of his trousers, and when Chu Wanning answered with a whimper as quiet as a breath, Mo Ran didn’t continue down but went up and under instead.

He pinched Chu Wanning’s nipple and surprised a gasp out of him, and that gasp was going to have him coming before Chu Wanning if he wasn’t careful. That was *not* allowed to happen this time.

“I won’t let them,” he promised, and sealed it with a long kiss. “If anyone ever sees you like this I’ll kill them. Sees you wanting this, wanting *me*. Only *I’m* allowed to see you like this…”

He indulged himself in a single shift of his cock against Chu Wanning’s hip, and then pulled back; Chu Wanning made a tiny noise of protest, and beneath the heat Mo Ran felt *warmth*, because Chu Wanning’s attention was sure as fuck only on him now.

“All I’ve ever wanted,” he said, and granted some mercy with a slow movement of his leg, “was for you to look at me. I didn’t even know why. I just saw you and I was gone. Even before I knew how good you are. Wanning… I’d die if you ever looked at anyone else. I’d fucking *die*.”

Chu Wanning mumbled something against his throat, half kiss and half reassurance, and that was enough for Mo Ran to shove close again. The corners of his eyes were stinging, and in the dim light he saw the matching red around Chu Wanning’s own. He was always so sharp, always needles and lightning and knife-edges, but only Mo Ran had ever seen him like this, eyes dazed and lips parting as the sensation began to overwhelm even Chu Wanning’s inhuman willpower.

Mo Ran gave into temptation, and he surged forward with a lip-bruising kiss and a grinding leg, shifting against Chu Wanning's body until he found the perfect sensation to chase. And through it all, he thought that just the smell of Chu Wanning's skin and hair was enough to drive him to madness. It was enough to drive him to hell, to go down willing and wild if it just meant that he could never stop touching this man.

Chu Wanning arched against him with a whimper and a shudder, followed by a clinging collapse, which meant that Mo Ran could finally abandon his own endurance and come. It was only after the blissful blindness passed that he realised that he'd been biting the curve of Chu Wanning's neck, and by the way Chu Wanning was (*finally*) panting, he'd only just realised it as well.

He released Chu Wanning's wrists and put his arms around him instead, pulling him so close and tight he felt as though he almost could pull him into his own body, to protect him with his own flesh. But what right did he have, to take so good and kind a person as Chu Wanning into himself?

He wasn't worthy, he thought, as he pressed kiss after kiss to his Wanning's face and hair. Just blessed.

Chapter 89: Inside the Water Prison

Chapter Summary

> Hello friends! 💖 I'm sorry for the delay, it's been due to a few things: leaving my job, taking some time to be very burnt out, a family trip. And more than anything, the next few chapters are tricky because they have so many moving parts, so I'm having to write ahead of myself instead of posting each chapter as it's finished, in case I need to change things. But I feel like it's beginning to be wrangled out!

Before they went to bed, and despite Mo Ran's protestations, Chu Wanning insisted on checking the bathroom glass himself. He ordered Mo Ran to stay inside and wave at him, and went out in his slippers into the courtyard.

It was a little below freezing, but there was no snow; Beijing was usually far too dry in December. But the dryness made the temperature feel biting, and by the time Chu Wanning had assured himself that, *yes*, it was one-way glass, and so *yes*, there was no way their outrageous behaviour had been witnessed, he was shivering.

Luckily, he had Mo Ran to warm him up. Unluckily, Mo Ran was too prostrate with guilt for another round, and the rest of the night passed remarkably chastely.

Mo Ran spent the next morning guiltily slinking around the suite, looking like nothing so much as a dog that had been scolded for humping a guest's leg. Chu Wanning hadn't even scolded him! Well, not for the sex (Was it sex? They'd been fully clothed… Counterpoint: it hadn't exactly been a handshake, had it?), but he had for the furtive remorse: "Do you think I couldn't have made you stop?" he'd hissed. "Couldn't kick you like Xue Meng had? You think Xue Meng could do something I couldn't?"

His arrogant words would come back to haunt him very shortly. Interest was the father of expertise, and Chu Wanning had no interest in money. He had a general understanding of economics in a macro sense, of course, but knew nothing about finance on a personal level. He was absolutely scrupulous in his personal finances and kept them as simple as possible, due to both his principles and to his precarious personal situation: it would be the easiest thing in the world to bring a charge of tax evasion against him for even the smallest perceived

irregularity. So his health insurance and his basic pension were all through Sisheng University, as was his flat's mortgage via the HPF. That was his only debt; he didn't have an overdraft or a credit card, and didn't own any stocks. He and Xue Zhengyong made sure that two copies of all of his financial details were made by the University accountants – one by a member of the Party, and one whom they trusted – to ensure that every one matched.

Otherwise, after his regular charitable donations, his biggest out-going payments each month were to his lawyer and to the dry cleaners across the road who used to do his laundry for him. Consequently, their Thursday meeting at ICBC showed him how out of his depth he was. It also showed him how much Xue Meng knew. All of his envious reading had made him shrewd, and he asked twice as many questions as Mo Ran, and four times as many as Chu Wanning.

That afternoon, they took a picture of Mo Ran (beaming) and Jiang Xi (solemnly smiling) signing a piece of paper; the contract itself was nonsense, any real paperwork would take weeks to draft, but the photograph was for no one's benefit but Hua Binan's. It was placed at the head of a press announcement which detailed the plans for the clinic and its proposed name, as well as a brief line about the young philanthropist's generosity and unprecedented concern for those with BBS.

Mo Ran unblocked his number to send it to Hua Binan.

Jiang Xi wants to wait until his New Year's Eve party in Yangzhou to make the official announcement, but I wanted you to be the first to know

Chu Wanning checked it. "Hm. It's too much. Take out the 'in Yangzhou'. If we give him too much information, he'll know we're luring him. We need to let him work for it."

"He'll definitely know it'll be in Yangzhou?"

"It's pretty famous," Jiang Xi confirmed. "I agree with Chu Wanning."

"Don't send it yet," Chu Wanning said. "Nangong Xu might have developed some IP tracking software for him. Send it first thing in the morning. We need to give him enough

time to reach Yangzhou by the evening of the 31st, but not enough time to make it to Beijing."

The next morning, Mo Ran sent the message to Hua Binan, and immediately blocked him again.

"What if he replies?" Chu Wanning asked.

Mo Ran shook his head with a smile. "Letting him reply is giving him a pressure valve. We want it to build up and make him stupid."

Make him stupid. Over the next few hours in the ICBC building, Mo Ran's words chased themselves in circles around Chu Wanning's head. *Make him stupid.*

Hua Binan had made him stupid. Not made him *look* stupid – though that too – but made him truly, deeply, *stupid.*

He couldn't *think*. Not like he'd always been able to. His words were sometimes like poor prehistoric creatures trapped in a tarpit, sinking into darkness, but his thoughts had always been as fast and overwhelming as lightning.

Chu Wanning looked north-west, to where he knew the Haidian district and CNSA's headquarters were. He'd never be able to step foot in there again, blacklisted as he was, but some part of him felt that when Hua Binan had sheared through that faded old jumper, he'd sheared through the part of Chu Wanning that was once Yuheng, the brightest star of BeiDou, the young prodigy in the Tianwen-1 control room. Gone, thrown away like useless rags.

It wasn't just that he had trusted Hua Binan. He had been a little like this too after his time in the detention centre, or in RSDL. You *had* to become slower, with so little else to think about other than your situation. You had to lock the better parts of yourself away in a secret courtyard, deep within your soul, so that they could remain untouched by the rampage and the fire outside. But this time…

Time. Time. It would take time. It was just that they didn't have it.

He was free. Mo Ran was free. He had to look after them both, Mo Ran and Xue Meng. He should have felt pride as their teacher, to hear them talking so well without his input. It should have made him feel relieved. But instead, he felt sick with fear and shame that he was failing them yet again. How could he possibly protect them, when he couldn't even do this small thing?

How could he protect them, when he had been unable to protect himself?

Had Huaizui finally proven himself right, after all these years? How stupid Chu Wanning had been, how quixotic and naïve, when all those years ago, he had said that it was only by saving others that one could save oneself.

Hua Binan had taught him the meaning of helplessness.

Yesterday he had tried to follow the financial conversation, but today he let it flow away from him. He couldn't contribute. It was astonishing that Mo Ran and Jiang Xi listened to a word he said about anything, as he was the one who had known Hua Binan best. Or not at all. Who had *interacted* the most with Hua Binan, for years, and realised nothing.

He'd been so arrogant. He had always thought that whatever else he lacked – family, friends, looks, humanity, worth, a heart, a soul – at least he had his brain. Now he realised that he didn't even have that.

During that first… that first act. The first time Hua Binan had…

Chu Wanning had felt as though everything else of him had been stripped away, and that the only part of him that existed was his anus, and the overwhelming pain in it. He had been turned into a *hole* for Hua Binan to use, and some part of him felt like that still. He felt as though these bankers and financial advisors could see it the second he walked into the room; he had felt the night before last as though Hu Zongying had realised it immediately. With that in mind, it was surprising that he had been as polite as he had been.

Only with Mo Ran and Xue Meng did the feeling recede a little. With Xue Meng he could play the teacher, and with Mo Ran…

Mo Ran, he thought as he looked at him. He was asking about some particular stream of revenue, dark brows furrowed in concentration. But two nights ago, his expression had been even more intense, even more focused. Chu Wanning had truly felt as though Mo Ran had been looking only at him.

He had seen something more than Hua Binan's hole to use, and for just a few kind minutes, Chu Wanning had been able to forget.

But now he could not focus on the financial discussion, and the thought that had been gaining on him since they sent the message to Hua Binan that morning overtook him.

He stood up abruptly and gestured to the corridor. "Bathroom." He could feel Mo Ran's eyes on him as he left, *seeing him*, and he could feel as well the now-familiar anxiety whenever they were parted. It was like he was leaving his own heart beating inside Mo Ran's chest, and the connection ached more, felt more and more stretched and vulnerable, the further away from each other that they were.

Chu Wanning didn't have the room in his mind to resent this dependence. He'd considered ringing Nangong Si – CNSA might be barred to him, but perhaps he could visit Tsinghua – before he'd decided against it for two reasons. First, Mo Ran had to be here, and Chu Wanning had no intention of straying far. And second, Nangong Si would undoubtedly start asking questions…

The sensations of warm water and the clean smell of the soap were calming to him, but even they couldn't keep the thought at bay any longer. Mo Ran had messaged Hua Binan three and a half hours ago, and he could be uploading those disgusting videos even now. Chu Wanning had left his tablet in the meeting room, or he could have checked. What would he even check? Where would the videos be uploaded? Social media – surely not – would they not be removed by moderators? Chu Wanning had never used social media, only the old technical forums that had fallen out of fashion, and so he didn't even know: were posts monitored once uploaded, or were they held in a queue to be checked by moderators first? Were the moderators automatic, or human?

And as for *dirty* sites, he knew even less. The thought of appearing on one of those websites was enough to make his stomach clench and his mouth fill with saliva.

His hands were turning pink under the hot water, but they still felt as though they were covered in filth. Unclean. He pressed for another handful of soap, and begin to scrub them again. Raw. Maybe that's where the dirt was, under the skin.

A memory came to him, a flash from two weeks ago. He had clawed his hand and scratched at Hua Binan's thigh; without being trimmed for a week, there was enough growth to capture some skin cells, he had thought. Hua Binan was providing the movement back and forth, after all, so he just had to angle his fingers so that his nails…

Hua Binan would clean his corpse, but he might overlook the fingernails. Then, when Chu Wanning's body was discovered, they would find Hua Binan's DNA under his nails, rather than Mo Ran's. The police would look for that kind of thing, their forensic people, wouldn't they? Once they'd seen the damage elsewhere to his body. Even on a man, they would look at that area, wouldn't they?

Was the DNA still there?

Once he had made his deal with Mu Yanli, back in his flat, he'd scrubbed his nails until the undersides bled and the cuticles tore. But what if there was still DNA under them? Pumping more soap wasn't enough. He took his Leatherman out of his pocket and selected the knife with the smallest point; red blossomed underneath the offending fingernails and the pain provided a momentary relief. Blood would carry the DNA out, swirling into the small, scalding whirlpool, churning up the scum of the sandalwood-scented soap they used on the executive floor.

Clear, viscous liquid. White foam, flecked with pink…

The door banged open, and Chu Wanning came back to the bathroom. The water had all drained away, leaving only a scattering of bubbles. How long…?

He blinked and looked around, and blinked again when he saw Mo Ran. The meeting hadn't been due to finish for another forty minutes. But he didn't have time to ask before Mo Ran had crossed the bathroom and enfolded him into a tight embrace, not caring who might see them.

Chu Wanning didn't care either. His fingers hurt. And soon everyone would see much, much more–

His body spasmed, and Mo Ran tightened his grip. "It's all right. It's all right."

Mo Ran squeezed him until his legs stopped threatening to fold, though he couldn't seem to stop shaking.

"I was… Was…"

"You were gone for too long. I came looking."

How embarrassing, Chu Wanning thought at a distance. But that was a feeling he would have to get used to. When the videos–

"No, no," Mo Ran said in response to whatever his body was doing. "I said I was hungry. Only I noticed you'd not come back, Xue Meng got the hint, we made our excuses and we left. It's fine."

Mo Ran was going to have to leave. They would only have a few minutes, and then everyone would see Chu Wanning. See what he was. Chu Wanning didn't know what they'd see. "Go back…?"

"No. No need. They know what I want with the money, what I don't want, whatever. We've cancelled this afternoon's meeting. I have something more important to do."

More important? But they had already sent the press statement. A security meeting? Chu Wanning didn't know what was more important. He shuddered and turned his face into the crook of Mo Ran's neck.

"Xue Meng…?"

"He's in the corridor. He's standing guard. No one will come in." Magically, Mo Ran seemed to hear Chu Wanning's next question even as he was trying to torture it into words. "He just saw that you were in here, he didn't see anything else. You just wanted privacy. That's all."

Chu Wanning didn't know how long Mo Ran held him. Long enough that his thoughts began to straighten, and he could feel hairline cracks in his dried-out hands. He reluctantly pulled back, eyes fixed on the collar of Mo Ran's shirt.

"Let's see them," Mo Ran said gently, and lifted his left. "It's okay. Mum's hands were like this at the end of a night, from washing the dishes – a little bit of lotion and they'll be fine."

Shame washed through him in a flood of lucidity: Duan Yihan's hands cracked from providing for her child, and his hands cracked from insanely trying to wash Hua Binan from them. He pulled back sharply. "They're fine already. There's no need to fuss. I'm fine."

Mo Ran didn't reply. Instead he reached over to the sink, clicked the blade of the Leatherman home, and held it out to Chu Wanning.

His right hand shook as it closed around the cold metal, and he heard Mo Ran's sharp exhalation when he saw the blood.

"*Wanning*..."

Chu Wanning had to think. Think past the agony in Mo Ran's voice. He had to remember who he was, and what he had to do, before Hua Binan destroyed what was left of his life. That was what was important. The next two days…

“Important,” he croaked. “What’s… what’s the important thing?”

“What?”

“That you have to do,” he said. “You cancelled this afternoon’s meeting.”

“Ah,” Mo Ran said softly. “Well. We’re flying to Yangzhou tomorrow. So I want to see the Forbidden City.”

“The Forbidden City? But– but we…”

“We have two members of Jiang Xi’s security team with us. We’ll wrap up. I wanted to see it while we’re here. And Tsinghua University. To see another place that you’d been. The Beidou Immortal…”

Chu Wanning looked up sharply, but he couldn’t see any mockery in his violet-black eyes. The sincerity was even more discomforting than the teasing would have been, and he looked away. “You want to go to one of my *almae matres*? After what happened at Rufeng?”

Mo Ran snorted. “That’s a good point. Only the Forbidden City, then. Nothing bad ever happened there.”

He raised Chu Wanning’s right hand, and the hairs on his head stood straight up when Mo Ran kissed his fingertips with a touch like breath.

“They’re dirty,” Chu Wanning hissed, voice cracking.

“No.” Mo Ran kissed his hand again. “Come on. Let’s get these sorted out. Which one should we go to first, after that? The Forbidden City, or the circle one, the temple. What’s is called?”

“The Temple of Heaven.”

“Right, that’s it.” Mo Ran covered Chu Wanning’s hand with his own, protecting the damaged nails from sight and touch, and led him to the door. “When was that built, then? Was that Ming or Qing?”

“Ming,” Chu Wanning whispered. Was Mo Ran doing this deliberately? Was he humouring him? Was he trying to give him something else to think about? Or was he trying to remind Chu Wanning of whom he had been before? The Chu Wanning he had been in Beijing, the Chu Wanning who could teach? “It was finished in 1420…”

Mo Ran smiled down at him. “Just like the hydrogen line.”

Chapter 90: Wait at Leisure while the Enemy Labours

Chapter Notes

> A thousand apologies for such a delay! There's been a lot of research and logistical nitty-gritties to straighten into shape! 🙇‍♂️🙇‍♂️🙇‍♂️

They didn’t get to the Forbidden City.

Mo Ran had reassured himself that Chu Wanning’s hand wasn't unbearably painful – the blood pooling under the nails made his stomach turn, but Chu Wanning swore to him that it looked worse than it was.

“Stop, Mo Ran, I’m fine,” he said as they stepped out of the bathroom. Xue Meng looked up anxiously.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just my hands. I told you, it’s too dry in Beijing, that’s all. I just need some petroleum jelly or lanolin.”

And Xue Meng believed him.

That was what blew Mo Ran’s mind. In his eyes, Chu Wanning’s shamed distress was as clear as day, despite his still face and irritated expression. But it was because he’d learnt to read him; a year ago, he had been as blind and illiterate as Xue Meng was.

No. More. Way more.

Xue Meng had never thought that Chu Wanning could be a sexual predator.

"I need to go down and find my tablet."

"No worries, I have it," Xue Meng said, handing it over in its case. His phone started ringing. "Sorry, hang on- Mum? Yes, I'm fine?"

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning froze. Xue Meng looked up at them.

"No, we're all fine – wait a sec, I'm putting you on speaker."

"Amitabha! When Wanning texted us we were so worried–"

"Yuheng, why did you say you were at the hospital?! Why the hell weren't you picking up–"

"I didn't," Chu Wanning said. "I haven't texted–"

He looked at Mo Ran, and Mo Ran saw the realisation in his eyes at the exact same moment it sparked through Mo Ran's synapses.

Chu Wanning's face sharpened. "Xue Meng, turn on the camera, let your mother see that you're all right. We're in the ICBC building, we're all fine. But I didn't text you. Hua Binan did."

"What?! Why would he- How *could he?!"*

Chu Wanning dropped the tablet's case on the floor. "He took my phone. I wiped it remotely, but it'll still have the SIM card. So your phone registered the number as mine."

“He’s at the house,” Mo Ran said. “In Wuchang. That’s where he’ll be.”

Chu Wanning nodded. “He’s worked out that we managed to leave my flat without him seeing, and now he wants to see if you left your house. If there was anyone there to leave.”

“Have you texted him back?”

“No, we were calling but you weren’t picking up- he didn’t pick up, I mean.”

“Good. Try ringing a couple more times, as if you’re frantic.”

“Why?”

“If the phone is on again, I can see where he is.” His fingers danced across the tablet screen like it was his guqin.

“Yes – yes! We can find that crazy bastard. How dare he? I’ll choke him like a fucking chicken!”

“He’ll be gone. But we can see if he takes it our bait. Text him back. Say, ‘Which hospital? Are you in Yangzhou already? We thought you were still in Shanghai.’”

Xue Meng smirked. He turned the camera around so that Mo Ran could see his aunt’s white face, and so that she could see they were all right.

“Wanning! What happened to your hand?”

“Nothing – Beijing’s just too dry. Some petroleum jelly and I’ll be fine,” he replied, not taking his eyes off the tablet. “Got him. He’s in Wuchang.”

“I wish I had some kind of remote sniper rifle!” Xue Zhengyong shouted. *“Aiya, I wish I could kill him from here! I can’t believe we let that demon into our house!”*

“He’s texted back!” Mo Ran heard Wang Chuqing say. *“He said, ‘The same place I recovered in.’”*

“He knows that address, he had a Guyueye study moved there. Don’t ask him the name. We need to drag it out. Don’t reply yet.”

“We should move this out,” Mo Ran said. “Back to the hotel.”

“Mn. I want to see if he makes a move east.”

The Forbidden City plan was silently abandoned. All the way back to the hotel, and for the hours after that, Chu Wanning watched his tablet with all the focus of a cat watching a bird, as Hua Binan went south-east towards Shimian, and then north-east to Ya’an. Meanwhile, Mo Ran and Xue Meng brainstormed further delaying text messages for Xue Zhengyong and Wang Chuqing to send to ‘Chu Wanning’.

At about sunset, Chu Wanning sighed. “He’s turned off the phone,” he said. “Approaching Suining.”

“So he’s gone around Chengdu to the south, heading east. That’s a good sign,” Xue Meng said. “I’ll tell Mum and Dad.”

“We kept him on for way longer than I thought we would,” Mo Ran said, with a comforting hand on Chu Wanning’s back. “We know he’s on the right route. He’ll have to stop to sleep, but if it takes about twenty-four hours, you predicted the window for him to reach Yangzhou perfectly.”

Chu Wanning didn't look like they'd achieved any kind of victory. There were deep shadows under his eyes. He waited until Xue Meng had gone to have a shower before he spoke to Mo Ran.

"He shouldn't come. Xue Meng. I'm going to tell him to stay in Beijing."

Mo Ran sat down next to him. "It makes sense," he began carefully. "Hua Binan knows how much you care about him."

Chu Wanning nodded. "If you weren't needed for the announcement, I'd say the same to you."

"I know. And you know what I'd do. But Xue Meng would do that too. He'd argue, but eventually, he'd pretend to agree, and then follow us anyway."

Chu Wanning's eyes flashed with anger. "If he did that, I would tell him I would no longer supervise him."

"Aaaaand he would reply that you can't supervise him if you're dead either," Mo Ran reasoned, and squeezed Chu Wanning's left hand. "And then he'd do exactly what I'd do. When we thought the police had you, my uncle told us to leave well alone, so we agreed… and then immediately drove to Ya'an, where Mu Yanli was."

"And look at how that ended," Chu Wanning pointed out. "I might have taught Xue Meng experimental design, but he is intelligent enough to know that this is *not* the opportunity to test the principle of replication."

"Okay. But let him stay at the hotel, in Yangzhou. Then it'll only be a few hours, not days, and it won't hurt him so much."

“I don’t want him hurt at all.”

“I think at this point it’s about harm minimisation for all of us. Best option would be if the hotel overlooks the park or something. Give him a specific task to do, so he feels like he’s part of the team, rather than the child being protected.”

Chu Wanning pinched the bridge of his nose. “Mn. You’re right. But I…”

The silence lingered as Chu Wanning rubbed his eyes, and Mo Ran felt his arteries twist and knot.

“I know.” Mo Ran smiled sadly. “He doesn’t know how lucky he’s been to get put into the ‘child to be protected’ role. But, annoying as he is, it’s part of his charm. If he’d had something else to focus on he probably wouldn’t have come to Ya’an with me.”

Chu Wanning sighed, and turned Mo Ran’s hand over, to stroke one fingertip along his lifeline. “Not all of my students are so disobedient, you know…”

“’Beyond remedy’,” Mo Ran said with a soft chuckle, and nuzzled Chu Wanning’s ear. “Why do you put up with me?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Chu Wanning murmured, and, after a second’s hesitation, kissed Mo Ran’s cheek.

Mo Ran couldn’t help the sound of delight that he made as he gathered Chu Wanning into his lap; it wasn’t that Wanning wasn’t affectionate, but his gestures of affection were idiosyncratic. They were often small things, secret things, that could be denied if rejected. Resits and scoldings and hours of tutoring. Instant coffee kept in the cupboard. Sleeves cut from a t-shirt. A comparatively brazen gesture like a kiss took a great deal of trust and courage for his Wanning, and Mo Ran treasured it.

“If he doesn’t come…” Chu Wanning’s hands were trembling along his jawbone. “Mo Ran. If Hua Binan doesn’t come to Yangzhou, or if he escapes… I want you to board a plane out of China.”

“No,” Mo Ran said immediately.

“We’ll tell the authorities about him, it’ll be hard for him to leave. But as soon as your wealth is made public the government will notice you. They might give you an exit ban as well, so you need to be out of the country before then. Malaysia’s the easiest country that doesn’t require a visa for Chinese passport holders.”

“No,” he said again, and held up his hand to stay any further exhortations. “No. Please, Wanning. Don’t ask me that again.”

“You don’t know what he’ll do,” Chu Wanning said. “He’s sadistic. I mean that in a clinical sense. It’s not hyperbole, it’s… I don’t think he even realised it himself, until he started to… Until he discovered…” Whatever Chu Wanning was remembering made him scrunch up his eyes and shake his head. “What he saw when he was a child warped his mind.”

“I know. And you think I could swan off to Malaysia with my money and leave you trapped in a country with him?” He smiled and nudged Chu Wanning’s shoulder with his own. “You must have a pretty low opinion of me.”

Chu Wanning’s breath caught. He shook his head. “No.”

How easy life had been in Yuliang. Mo Ran had thought that he’d been suffering that week, with his guilt, with his aching heart. He’d been such a fool.

“I know. I know you don’t. You think better of me than I think of myself. But please, Wanning. How could I leave the only people I love? Out of fear that he might hurt *me*? I couldn’t. Don’t ask me again.”

Chu Wanning's shoulders dropped. He shook his head, eyes closed. "I had to…"

"I know. I know why. But you have now. And I've said no. I meant it when I said that I'd rather die than leave you."

Chu Wanning exhaled and turned his face against Mo Ran's. He reached around Mo Ran's head to cradle the back of it, and Mo Ran could feel his fingertips clustered against his scalp like a constellation as he pressed their foreheads together.

*

Xue Meng didn't take the decision well. The argument took up much of the ninety-minute flight to Yangzhou; Jiang Xi had given them the use of the conference room for it, and outside Mo Ran made awkward conversation with Jiang Xi, greased only somewhat by the presence of Wang Qingni, and brought him up to date on the incident with Chu Wanning's phone.

Xue Meng was silent on the drive through Yangzhou, clearly feeling humiliated. Mo Ran understood how he felt, but didn't have the mental bandwidth for too much sympathy. *Xue Meng* hadn't been the one to be kept handcuffed to a chair, shoulders burning, insane with lack of sleep. *Xue Meng* hadn't been the one whom Chu Wanning had clung to, delirious with fever, as he sobbed to remember the threats that Hua Binan had made against his precious youngest student. *Xue Meng* hadn't been the one to live with the thought of Chu Wanning futilely struggling as Hua Binan said that he'd skin and burn and rape and kill Xue Meng in front of him.

Mo Ran stopped himself. He felt as though his temples were wrapped in an iron band, slowly being tightened with a vice. Whatever humiliation Xue Meng was feeling right now, Mo Ran had felt it ten-fold in that cell, confessing his every sin to Mu Yanli, and Chu Wanning had felt it a thousand-fold.

Chu Wanning… Chu Wanning was growing more like glass every minute: hard, cold, and brittle. He'd slept terribly again. The first time he woke Mo Ran he'd been writhing away from someone, struggling to breathe, and the second time by muttering something about 'purple' with audible fear and distress. He looked exhausted, the shadows under his eyes as violet as whatever he'd been dreaming about.

Mo Ran didn't exactly feel at his absolute best either. He didn't know what would be worse: if Hua Binan turned up, or if he didn't. The growing dread he'd felt in Linyi was nothing compared to this, but it wasn't just dread. Terror and excitement mingled and spiked his blood with adrenalin.

Tomorrow, Chu Wanning might be in danger.

Tomorrow, Mo Ran might be able to look Hua Binan in the eyes, and then murder him.

They went straight to Slender West Lake Park from the airport, where Hu Zongying was waiting for them. The park was still open to the public, and would be until noon the next day, but Jiang Xi's team's surveillance operation was in full swing.

The party would take place among the buildings of Fuzhuang, the 'Mallard Island' which looked out across the star attraction of the Five-Pavillion Bridge. The usual snack counters were being hastily hidden behind expensive screens, replaced with bars and tables for the food. There, the guests would be able to watch the light show on the bridge, or take the little boats onto the lake itself.

More importantly, Hu Zongying pointed out, it was an island with only a single walkway. This connected Fuzhuang to *another* island, bearing the Lianxing temple south of the main Slender West Lake and overlooked by a great white and gold *dagoba*. This was then only connected to the rest of the park by four walk-ways, one being the Five-Pavillion Bridge itself. Along with teams at the main gates to the park, he was confident that his team would be well aware of anyone approaching Fuzhuang without clearance.

If the worst came to the worst, Jiang Xi was, after all, classified as a senior member of "industrial, financial, warehousing, and scientific research units", which meant that his specialised security team and individual escort personnel were legally allowed to carry firearms. One of these would be stationed at each entry-point to the event, and four (including Hu Zongying), would accompany Jiang Xi himself.

The three checked into the luxury hotel in the centre of the park, and then decamped immediately to the nearby Marriott. Mo Ran thought that this was silly, but it was Hu

Zongying's suggestion, and he was willing to play along if it staved off another argument about Hua Binan's messages.

As they walked towards the cheaper hotel, Chu Wanning pointed out a steeply curved white bridge, thronged with tourists taking photographs.

"*And clear in the moon on the Twenty-Four Bridge, girls white as jade are teaching flute-music*," he recited softly.

Xue Meng glared at him, and stalked away.

*

He is in the cellar.

It is exactly as he remembered. He can barely breathe for the cloying incense coating his nostrils, the sweetly-scented smoke choking him. He could believe that he had never left, save for one difference. The body on the mattress behind him, bloody and naked –

No. He pounds his fists on the door. No! He can't look. He *refuses* to look. Because if he looks, if he turns around and sees Chu Wanning's broken body, then there is nothing in the world that he can do. Then there is no hope left.

"Let me out! Let me out!"

Behind the door is Mu Yanli. No. Mo Guiying. No! No, it *is* Mu Yanli, because the body on the bed belongs to–

He can hear it behind him.

“Mo Ran...”

The incense has coalesced into a spirit, into a grotesque ghost. This spirit doesn’t chew his chopsticks when he’s tired, this spirit’s ears don’t turn red when he’s pleased or embarrassed, this spirit doesn’t pretend to hate it when Mo Ran calls him affectionate nicknames or teases him with filthy words.

This spirit is implacable. This spirit is about to pronounce judgement on him: that he is beyond remedy. And then this spirit will drag him down to hell, where he belongs.

He screams and bangs on the door. “I didn’t do it! I didn’t kill him! Please, please, I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it, let me out, *let me out!*”

“You deserve this. You deserve death.”

“No! No, please, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

He looks behind him, but Chu Wanning lies still and pale on the stinking mattress.

The spirit behind him is himself, snarling at him with a distorted mouth, showing wolf-like fangs, eyes bleeding.

“They’re all going to blame you. They all think it’s your fault. Burn it down.”

“No! No, it wasn’t me, it wasn’t me! I didn’t do it!”

“You did. He’s dead because of you. They’re all *dead because of you. Let the woman in. Let them blame you. Then burn it all down.”*

The incense is everywhere, thickening into something solid, darkening to black. He can't see. He can't see himself, or the mattress, or Chu Wanning – Chu Wanning hasn't even become a ghost to drag him to hell, he's just left him, he's just left him alone, he's gone and Mo Ran will never see him again, just like he'll never see his mother again – it's so dark, so dark, he'll never know light or warmth again, his mother and Chu Wanning had left together and he is alone in the dark.

"Please! It's dark, I'm scared! Please don't leave me! I'm scared!"

"MO RAN!"

He woke with a gasp. He could *breathe*; the incense was gone, and instead of darkness, there was the warm light of a bedside lamp.

Above him was Chu Wanning's face, the only blackness his hair and his eyes, shining and glittering with the lamplight. His fingers were cool and gentle on his cheek.

"It was a nightmare," he said. "Mo Ran… You're covered in sweat, let me get a cloth–"

"No," he croaked as he grasped Chu Wanning's wrist. "Don't leave. Please don't leave me."

Chu Wanning sat back on the bed. "All right. I won't leave. Let me…" He raised his other arm, and dabbed at Mo Ran's face with his sleeve, before he pulled his whole pyjama top off to use instead. "There. It's all right. It was only a dream."

"No." He shook his head. "No. I didn't– I didn't do it."

"I know you didn't."

"But I did. I did, but not, not *that*–"

“*Xu, xu, xu.* I know. I know you didn’t.” Chu Wanning mopped Mo Ran’s face, and rubbed at his damp hairline. “There.”

Mo Ran chased the smell of the pyjama shirt, the woody, flowery scent that calmed his heartbeat even more than the light did. “Can we leave the light on…?” Chu Wanning preferred to sleep in total darkness; a single LED could keep him awake for hours, but in Mo Ran’s sleepy selfishness, the idea of that suffocating black was terrifying.

“Of course. Come on, like this.”

Chu Wanning maneuvered Mo Ran to lie across him, and Mo Ran could bury his face in Chu Wanning’s silk-soft hair and breathe that smell, only that smell. Underneath his bare chest, he could feel the bump of scar tissue.

“It was my fault. I upset you, with what I asked yesterday,” Chu Wanning whispered. “I won’t again. I won’t let anyone part us. I promise.”

Chapter 91: The Eighteenth Hexagram

Chapter Notes

> Oh my God, I'm so, so sorry for how long this has taken! I've drafted and redrafted, written and rewritten, and I think at this point I just have to accept the use of the classic adage "Started making it. Had a breakdown. Bon appétit." 😂
>
> I've told myself that if I need to I can always go back an edit what I need into this chapter, but frankly, I'm just over-thinking everything at this point. So. Thank you for your patience, as always. Bon appétit!

The very best day of the year in the Hangzhou Children's Welfare Institute had been that of the Lunar New Year. The children didn't receive any red envelopes, but they did receive new clothes, and donations of toys from the local government, the Party, and sometimes even kind-hearted members of the community.

The stuffed toys were prized, but tended to be given to the youngest children. The older boys usually received balls and toy cars, but the girls overwhelmingly received dolls. Chang Wanning hadn't gravitated towards any one toy in particular, after the destruction of his train, but he had appreciated the *groups* of toys. He liked to organise the balls and cars, and especially any building blocks or puzzle pieces, by size, by colour, by shape.

One sunny day, the girls were all outside, playing with a new skipping rope. Their rhythmic chanting was preferable to the screams and shouts of the boys, and Chang Wanning had sat in the girl's side of the playroom, avoiding the boisterousness as much as he could. It also gave him a rare opportunity to organise a new set of toys, of which he immediately took advantage.

The dolls provided new challenges. There was the distinction between cloth dolls and plastic dolls, of course, but there were also small dolls, large dolls, baby dolls, adult dolls, girl dolls, boy dolls, dolls with black hair, dolls with yellow hair – and that wasn't even taking into account all of the clothes that the dolls were wearing, all different colours and materials and patterns. So to begin with, Chang Wanning had decided to simplify the proceedings, and undressed each doll so that he could arrange them properly. He would sort through the clothes afterwards.

What actually happened afterwards was that Auntie Luo, who was usually very calm and cheerful, had shrieked when she saw his organisational efforts. She began slapping him, until he cried first from shock and then from pain, and she screamed that she had not known that he was such a *disgusting, dirty, naughty* boy. He didn't know what he had done that made him disgusting or dirty or naughty, but Auntie Liu had been so very sure, so very certain, and he had sniffled through the night in shame and horror and confusion.

In his heart, it *felt* like an injustice. He hadn't any words to explain himself, explain the categories he had been thinking of, but clearly he had done *something* very, very wicked, to make one of the kinder aunties so repulsed and revolted by him.

The weight of it felt physical, and the next day he hadn't been able to move out of bed. The aunties said that he was sulking, but he wasn't. He was grappling with this strange new information about himself. He was disgusting, and he was dirty, and he was naughty, and worst of all, he didn't understand why, so he couldn't change it.

However, halfway through the morning, Chang Yeye had visited his bed and clumsily patted his head.

"It's all right," she'd whispered. "*We're* not angry. Putting all the clothes on them is the funnest part. You can play dolls with us again, if you want, and you can take the clothes off, and we can put the clothes on. Yeah?"

Chu Wanning had not thought about Chang Yeye in twenty years, but the sight of Wang Qingni carrying their hanfu boxes into their room, practically dancing with excitement, brought the memory back to him like a bolt entering a cow's head in an abattoir. Putting the clothes on the dolls is the funnest part.

When he assessed himself in the bathroom mirror, he had to admit that it could have been much, much worse. Wang Qingni had picked out an austere ensemble for him, layers of white silk, completed by a final, wide-sleeved robe which was almost transparent, but woven throughout with a pattern of clouds in pale silver. A wide sash felt snug and protective around his waist - just like a cummerbund - and a pendant made up of pieces of white jade weighed against his thigh.

Wang Qingni shrieked when he opened the bathroom door, making Chu Wanning wince.

"You look *amazing*, you look *incredible!* I can't believe how perfectly it fits, this is my magnum opus, I need to put this on my CV – can I take a photo?"

"No!"

"It's just for me," she said, ignoring him and snapping away, "– and a side one – your hair, I'll help you with your hair, I bought a silver *guan* to go with it with the cutest little pearls, but you should leave your hair half down, like in a drama – I just couldn't get what Mo Ran said out of my head, about your nickname being the 'Beidou Immortal', so it's technically *guzhuang* but Dr Jiang won't mind because you look *so good*–"

Chu Wanning was about to lock himself back in the bathroom and tear the outfit from his body when Mo Ran gently pulled away both Wang Qingni and all of Chu Wanning's attention.

"Leave him alone, *jiejie*, or he'll do a runner, and no one else will be able to behold your genius."

Chu Wanning was forced to concur. She *was* a genius. Mo Ran's outfit was the opposite of Chu Wanning's – dark, luxurious, expansive. Opulent. Wang Qingni hadn't gone so far as to buy him the beaded crown he'd jokingly asked for, but he'd managed to pull just enough of his wolf-cut hair into a small bun on top of his head, and attach a gold *guan* with green jade pieces to it. Already tall and broad-shouldered, the deep black robe, magnificently embroidered with gold and violet flowers, made Mo Ran seem to fill the room, made him draw the eye like an Emperor striding into his throne room.

Mo Ran grinned. He reached out and put one fingertip beneath Chu Wanning's chin.

He realised with utter mortification that his jaw had dropped open.

“Good?”

Chu Wanning slapped his hand away. “You look utterly ridiculous!”

“He likes it,” Mo Ran said to Wang Qingni, making Chu Wanning want to slap him in earnest. “Not as much as I like this though. Damn. I’m the one making the announcement, Wang Qingni, and you give him this outfit?! Not one person’s going to be looking at me!”

“Shut up, you look amazing, as you well know,” she relied, beaming. “Ahhh, but you look so good *together*! Omg, one more photo, please, just for me, I’ll never share it, I promise!”

“No,” Chu Wanning said, as Mo Ran pulled him into place.

“Be nice,” he heard Mo Ran whisper in his ear, and a thrill ran down his spine. “Smile, just one. For me…”

Chu Wanning thought he managed to lift the corners of his lips. It must have been passable, because Mo Ran gave him a quick squeeze as the phone made a shutter sound. Mo Ran stepped forward to look.

“Omg, send that to me,” he said, and Chu Wanning marvelled at how perfectly he was able to match Wang Qingni’s energy and tone. It seemed easy for him – instinctive, even.

For the hundredth time that day, he nearly called the whole plan off. What the hell were they doing? The danger that he was placing Mo Ran in was unconscionable. He knew that he had promised not to ask Mo Ran to flee to Malaysia, but perhaps there was some new rhetorical technique, some new fact that he could wield to persuade him…

No. He forced himself to breathe again. Jiang Xi’s armed bodyguards would be there. They would be manning every entrance. If Hua Binan even managed to get into the park, he wouldn’t be able to come near them.

But he could feel it. The sensation of Hua Binan's hands on him. Of his body slamming into his. He could see the glint of the scalpel, the drop of paralytic falling from the needle. He could smell–

Chu Wanning shook the thought from his head. At least it had steadied him for what he now had to do; he rapped on Xue Meng's door.

Xue Meng opened it wearing only a towel wrapped around his hips. The shower was running, but his hair was dry; he was clearly just about to step in. "What?"

Chu Wanning had never heard Xue Meng be so insolent to him before. It made him feel obscurely relieved; if his most obedient student was talking to him with such a tone, he was feeling truly aggrieved, rather than buttering him up with the intention of slipping out later.

"We're on our way. Mo Ran will have his phone on at all times, except for during his speech. You can reach Jiang Xi and Hu Zongying as well."

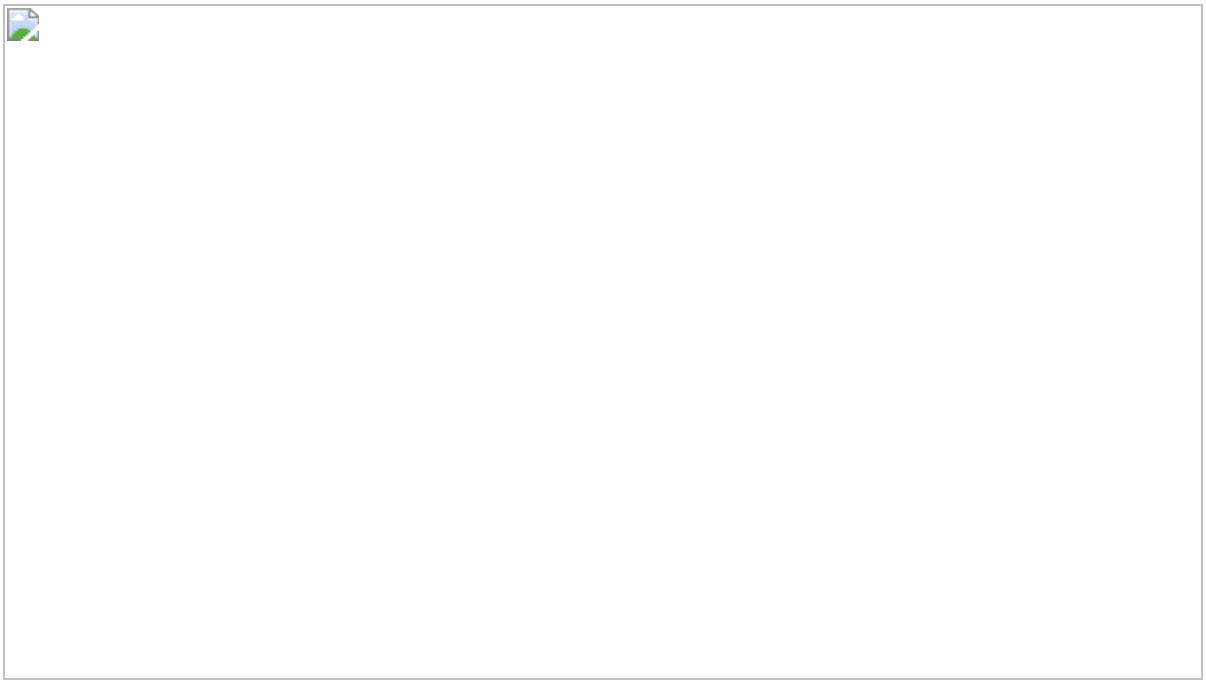
"Yeah."

"Please do keep an eye out," Chu Wanning tried, but it sounded weak even to him.

"Don't know what I'll be able to see from here," Xue Meng said mulishly. "Except maybe the fireworks. Is that allowed? Can I watch the fireworks, or should I draw the blinds before midnight?"

Chu Wanning did not have the mental energy for this tonight. Let Xue Meng sulk. That, he could live with. Telling Xue Zhengyong and Wang Chuqing that their son was dead – *that*, he could not.

*



Originally, half of the party would have been on lantern-bedecked boats, gliding over the surface of the lake, but Hu Zongying had torpedoed this plan as being far too difficult to police. Instead, most of the rank-and-file Guyueye employees were enjoying the raucous entertainment underneath the gold and white stupa, while the shareholders and personally invited guests populated the wonderously lit buildings of Fuzhuang Island, overlooking the famous sight of the Five Pavilion Bridge.

Most had obeyed the dress code with great enthusiasm, though some had interpreted it to refer to their own national dress instead: Chu Wanning could see the distinctive shapes of hanbok and kimono here and there, and one white man was wearing a tartan kilt with a sporran.

His thoughts were among the staff guests across the walk-way, by Lianxing temple. Was Hua Binan among them? No one had reported his staff ID being used, and there were at least fifteen security guards pretending to be guests, complete with hanfu, looking out for him among them.

Chu Wanning caught himself thinking that this was the longest night of his life, but that was completely untrue. He had endured far, far longer nights.

He stood on the edge of the water, looking out across the rainbows being scattered across the surface. He kept the rest of his attention on Mo Ran, being introduced to more board members by Jiang Xi. The announcement of the clinic would be at half past ten, and then the service staff would circulate with trays of drinks to prepare for the countdown to the new year.

This time, none of them were wearing face masks. Hu Zongying had grilled Mo Ran and Chu Wanning about every detail of the Rufeng incident, and personally vetted every single member of the catering and service staff.

Remembering that night, Chu Wanning moved back into the shelter of the buildings, so that he could watch Mo Ran. He leant with his back against a wall, and crossed his arms to make himself look as unfriendly and off-putting as possible. No one approached him.

Chu Wanning was glad of it. It had been one thing to decide to work with Jiang Xi and Guyueye as a matter of strategy – the placement of a *weiqi* piece, the laying down of a card – but another altogether to be in this place, with these people…

No. He had been thinking about Auntie Luo earlier, and had remembered his own gross hypocrisy. He was guilty of judging without waiting for an explanation, and with less reason. He had so often exploded at his students, snapping and punishing.

The instance that haunted him the most was from Mo Ran's first year. He had picked a flower from the botany plant-beds, not knowing that it was a PhD student's project to see if a particularly rare cultivar could survive in the changeable mountain climate. Chu Wanning could still remember Mo Ran's flustered, cut-off attempts at an explanation as Chu Wanning had personally marched him to the botany department to confess.

It was one of those memories that tormented him on lonely nights, that reached into his intestines with long fingers and *twisted*. But he had not learnt. His terrible temper and his cruel expectations – he had vented them on all of his students.

Perhaps that was why they… What instance had it been for Shi Mingjing, or Hua Binan? What had he done to them, to make them want to humiliate him and violate him so painfully

in return?

So he tried to clear his mind of that self-righteous anger when he heard the man currently at the drinks table, haranguing the poor server. A middle-aged man who had not deigned to obey the *hanfu* dress code, though the thirty-years-younger beauty on his arm (egregious as it was for Chu Wanning of all people to be noticing any disparity in age) was utterly resplendent in a Tang dynasty ensemble in pink and peach and gold, a Chinese Eos.

"Moutai – wait," the man said suddenly. He pointed at a wooden crate, half-hidden underneath the white tablecloth. "Are those fifteen-year reserve bottles?"

The server gave an apologetic smile. "They are, sir, but there's only this one crate; we're trying to find someone to ask, to see if they're reserved for the announcement, or the toasts at midnight–"

"It doesn't matter, open one now. Typical of Jiang Xi to save them to show off later, when everyone's already drunk. He understands pretension, not alcohol, that one."

"Sir… It's all my fault, I'm sorry, this crate wasn't labelled properly so I don't know when we're allowed to open it–"

"Boy," the man said, "if that crate was Guyueye, I'd own two bottles outright. Do you understand?"

"Sir…"

"I'm Gan Dayong. If anyone asks you, you say that Gan Dayong said that you were to open them. Now give me a fucking bottle, or tomorrow you won't have a job, understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the defeated server, and opened up the small clay bottle as quickly as his shaking hands would allow.

Ten thousand yuan for half a litre, Chu Wanning thought. The shareholder swallowed two thousand yuan's worth in the first mouthful.

"Ahhh, it's bitter – that's how you know it's the good stuff," he said with a paedagogic air, and Chu Wanning couldn't resist rolling his eyes. "Here, taste it."

The beauty beside him wrinkled her nose.

"I don't like bitter drinks," she said, and Chu Wanning nearly nodded in solidarity. "Is there any champagne?"

The server was on steadier ground here. "Of course, madam! If you prefer sweeter drinks, we have some demi-sec bottles – this is a very lovely Armand de Brignac."

"Demi-sec is too sweet," the shareholder said.

"Not for me," Eos said, and Chu Wanning silently applauded her. "May I have a glass of the Armand de Brignac then?"

"You realise that that has more calories in it?" Gan Dayong said, and pinched his date's waist.

"The Moutai had four times more, though," Chu Wanning said out loud, and then glided away before the shareholder could argue. He heard the beauty laugh behind him.

So much for being less of a judgemental bastard. Maybe it was the Five Pavilion Bridge, lit up in bright magenta, casting purple lights into everyone's eyes… Maybe it was Hua Binan, on an intercepting route. Was he in Yangzhou? Was he in the trees, aiming a gun at Mo Ran – Mo Ran, he needed to find Mo Ran, he could already taste the blood and feel the bullet tearing through his lungs and he needed to find–

“Hey,” said a soft voice by his left ear, and his eyelids fluttered shut.

Mo Ran was holding a sealed bottle of water. “I found a vending machine that they’d hidden behind one of the screens…” He unscrewed the lid, drained half of the bottle, and handed it to Chu Wanning.

“It’s meant to be a peach,” Chu Wanning said, taking it. “I was looking for you.”

“Jiang Xi’s been introducing me to the board.” Mo Ran had said that Chu Wanning should stay to one side; he wasn’t exactly the most popular person in Guyueye. “I had to escape.”

“Mn.” Their sleeves were long and voluminous enough that Chu Wanning was able to quickly squeeze Mo Ran’s hand.

Mo Ran gave him a scorchingly intimate look – they were meant to be being inconspicuous, for heaven’s sake – and returned with visible reluctance to the glamourous fray.

Chu Wanning drank slowly from the water bottle, allowing one small part of his mind to acknowledge the indirect kiss. The word had filtered around the party that a fifteen-year reserve Moutai was on offer. There was now a loud group of men by the hapless server, toasting each other excessively, while their wives and dates looked embarrassed. They clearly knew each other as well, often guests at these kind of events, and another server had rushed to the table to wield champagne in tandem with the baijiu.

A flat-screen television had been set up to show a gaudy countdown. The numbers flicked to show that there was now one hour and fifty-nine minutes until the new year; the announcement would be in half an hour.

Chu Wanning measured out half a dose of propranolol, just enough to steady his heart without making him tired, and finished the water that Mo Ran had given to him.

The Moutai drinkers had become louder. The servers were whispering to each other, and as Chu Wanning watched, one brought Wang Qingni over to the table. She shook her head, frowning, and began to look at something on her phone.

"Another!" the first man, Gan Dayong, shouted. "Open up another, come on! They're only small bottles."

The words came out strangely, through a clenched jaw. Chu Wanning felt a symmetrical tightness in his neck – what he felt when he needed to speak, but his words refused to come. But Gan Dayong didn't look distressed. He was grinning, a mocking, malevolent grin.

The other men were all grinning in the same way. Wolves baring their teeth. One of them snatched the next bottle of Moutai and poured out measures for each of them, and Chu Wanning watched his hand jerk. Hundreds of yuan splattered to the floor.

A memory struck Chu Wanning: the toppling of champagne glasses as Nangong Xu let his tray and his façade fall to the tasteful parquet floor in Rufeng.

"Make it two – typical of Jiang Xi to only let his best friends know!"

"I wouldn't have known if Lian Cheng hadn't told me," a new drinker said. "I've never tasted the fifteen year before, so bitter!"

Wang Qingni appeared to have told the servers that the tiger was out of the cage; the remaining bottles were quickly being arranged on trays with small glasses to be distributed among the party, before the vanguard obliterated the entire crate.

Chu Wanning caught her arm. "Who's in charge of the catering?"

Wang Qingni looked harried. "The head Chef is Pan Mengyao."

“What about drinks?”

“You saw all that?” Wang Qingni shook her head. “I’m trying to find her myself – unlabelled crates, no serving roster – I’m Dr. Jiang’s EA, I *don’t* do event logistics.”

“Where’s Hu Zongying?” Chu Wanning caught sight of him, shadowing Jiang Xi. “Hold off on the Moutai, just for a second…”

The bottles were clay, sealed with wax and stickers, but Hua Binan had been able to fool Chu Wanning with an antique pu’erh press. Perhaps it was paranoia, but an unlabelled crate with temptingly expensive drinks felt…

Hu Zongying, to his credit, didn’t call Chu Wanning a paranoid idiot. Instead he swept into action; he told Wang Qingni to tell the drinkers that the crate was spoilt, that’s why it was being hidden, and to get the delivery company on the phone to him immediately.

It was only a small noise, but he had been waiting for it. The toppling of champagne glasses, the ringing out of a gun – from Rufeng, he might have expected these. But instead, it was a single sharp inhalation, a crack in a throat, which shattered the evening, and Chu Wanning turned just in time to see the shareholder called Gan Dayong collapse to the ground.

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